

BEST ALL-TIME MYSTERY FICTION

AND

Verdict



Three O'Clock
by

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— AND OTHERS

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THREE O'CLOCK

A Novelette
BY WILLIAM IRISH

The bomb ticked away. Nine minutes left . . . eight . . . seven . . . while he struggled helplessly to get free. And then there was no time left at all . . .

SHE had signed her own death-warrant. He kept telling himself over and over that he was not to

blame, she had brought it on herself. He had never seen the man. He knew there was one. He had known for six weeks now. Little things had told him. One day he came home and there was a cigar-butt in an ashtray, still moist at one end, still
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warm at the other. There were gasoline-drippings on the asphalt in front of their house, and they didn't own a car. And it wouldn't be a delivery-vehicle, because the drippings showed it had stood there a long time, an hour or more. And once he had actually glimpsed it, just rounding the far corner as he got off the bus two blocks down the other way. A second-hand Ford. She was often very flustered when he came home, hardly seemed to know what she was doing or saying at all.

He pretended not to see any of these things; he was that type of man, Stapp, he didn't bring his hates or grudges out into the open where they had a chance to heal. He nursed them in the darkness of his mind. That's a dangerous kind of man.

If he had been honest with himself, he would have had to admit that this mysterious afternoon caller was just the excuse he gave himself, that he'd daydreamed of getting rid of her long before there was any reason to, that there had been something in him for years past now urging Kill, kill, kill. Maybe ever since that time he'd been treated at the hospital for a concussion.

He didn't have any of the usual excuses. She had no money of her own, he hadn't insured her, he stood to gain nothing by getting rid of her. There was no other woman he meant to replace her with. She didn't nag and quarrel with him. She was a docile, tractable sort of wife. But

this thing in his brain kept whispering Kill, kill, kill. He'd fought it down until six weeks ago, more from fear and a sense of self-preservation than from compunction. The discovery that there was some stranger calling on her in the afternoons when he was away was all that had been needed to unleash it in all its hydra-headed ferocity. And the thought that he would be killing two instead of just one, now, was an added incentive.

So every afternoon for six weeks now when he came home from his shop, he had brought little things with him. Very little things, that were so harmless, so inoffensive, in themselves that no one, even had they seen them, could have guessed — Fine little strands of copper wire such as he sometimes used in his watch-repairing. And each time a very little package containing a substance that — well, an explosives expert might have recognized, but no one else. There was just enough in each one of those packages, if ignited, to go Fffft! and flare up like flashlight-powder does. Loose like that it couldn't hurt you, only burn your skin of course if you got too near it. But wadded tightly into cells, in what had formerly been a soap-box down in the basement, compressed to within an inch of its life the way he had it, the whole accumulated thirty-six days worth of it (for he hadn't brought any home on Sundays) — that would be a different story. They'd never know. There

wouldn't be enough left of the flimsy house for them to go by. Sewer-gas they'd think, or a pocket of natural gas in the ground somewhere around under them. Something like that had happened over on the other side of town two years ago, only not as bad of course. That had given him the idea originally.

He'd brought home batteries too, the ordinary dry-cell kind. Just two of them, one at a time. As far as the substance itself was concerned, where he got it was his business. No one would ever know where he got it. That was the beauty of getting such a little at a time like that. It wasn't even missed where he got it from. She didn't ask him what was in these little packages, because she didn't even see them, he had them in his pocket each time. (And of course he didn't smoke coming home.) But even if she had seen them, she probably wouldn't have asked him. She wasn't the nosey kind that asked questions, she would have thought it was watch-parts, maybe, that he brought home to work over at night or something. And then too she was so rattled and flustered herself these days, trying to cover up the fact that she'd had a caller, that he could have brought in a grandfather-clock under his arm and she probably wouldn't have noticed it.

Well, so much the worse for her. Death was spinning its web beneath her busy feet as they bustled obliviously back and forth in those ground-floor rooms. He'd be in his shop tin-

kering with watch-parts and the phone would ring. "Mr. Stapp, Mr. Stapp, your house has just been demolished by a blast!"

A slight concussion of the brain simplifies matters so beautifully.

He knew she didn't intend running off with this unknown stranger, and at first he had wondered why not. But by now he thought he had arrived at a satisfactory answer. It was that he, Stapp, was working, and the other man evidently wasn't, wouldn't be able to provide for her if she left with him. That must be it, what other reason could there be? She wanted to have her cake and eat it too.

So that was all he was good for, was it, to keep a roof over her head? Well, he was going to lift that roof skyhigh, blow it to smithereens!

He didn't really want her to run off, anyway, that wouldn't have satisfied this thing within him that cried *Kill, kill, kill*. It wanted to *get* the two of them, and nothing short of that would do. And if he and she had a five-year-old kid, say, he would have included the kid in the holocaust too, although a kid that age obviously couldn't be guilty of anything. A doctor would have known what to make of this, and would have phoned a hospital in a hurry. But unfortunately doctors aren't mind-readers and people don't go around with their thoughts placarded on sandwich-boards.

The last little package had been brought in two days ago. The box

had all it could hold now. Twice as much as was necessary to blow up the house. Enough to break every window for a radius of blocks — only there were hardly any, they were in an isolated location. And that fact gave him a paradoxical feeling of virtue, as though he were doing a good deed; he was destroying his own but he wasn't endangering anybody else's home. The wires were in place, the batteries that would give off the necessary spark were attached. All that was necessary now was the final adjustment, the hook-up, and then —

Kill, kill, kill, the thing within him gloated.

Today was the day.

He had been working over the alarm-clock all morning to the exclusion of everything else. It was only a dollar-and-a-half alarm, but he'd given it more loving care than someone's Swiss-movement pocket-watch or platinum and diamond wristwatch. Taking it apart, cleaning it, oiling it, adjusting it, putting it together again, so that there was no slightest possibility of it failing him, of it not playing its part, of it stopping or jamming or anything else. That was one good thing about being your own boss, operating your own shop, there was no one over you to tell you what to do and what not to do. And he didn't have an apprentice or helper in the shop, either, to notice this peculiar absorption in a mere alarm-clock and tell someone about it later.

Other days he came home from work at five. This mysterious caller, this intruder, must be there from about two-thirty or three until shortly before she expected him. One afternoon it had started to drizzle at about a quarter to three, and when he turned in his doorway over two hours later there was still a large dry patch on the asphalt out before their house, just beginning to blacken over with the fine misty precipitation that was still falling. That was how he knew the time of her treachery so well.

He could, of course, if he'd wanted to bring the thing out into the open, simply have come an unexpected hour earlier any afternoon during those six weeks, and confronted them face to face. But he preferred the way of guile and murderous revenge; they might have had some explanation to offer that would weaken his purpose, rob him of his excuse to do the thing he craved. And he knew her so well, that in his secret heart he feared she would have if he once gave her the chance to offer it. Feared was the right word. He wanted to do this thing. He wasn't interested in a showdown, he was interested in a pay-off. This artificially-nurtured grievance had brought the poison in his system to a head, that was all. Without it it might have remained latent for another five years, but it would have erupted sooner or later anyway.

He knew the hours of her domestic routine so well that it was the sim-

plest matter in the world for him to return to the house on his errand at a time when she would not be there. She did her cleaning in the morning. Then she had the impromptu morsel that she called lunch. Then she went out, in the early afternoon, and did her marketing for their evening meal. They had a phone in the house but she never ordered over it; she liked, she often told him, to see what she was getting, otherwise the tradespeople simply foisted whatever they chose on you, at their own prices. So from one until two was the time for him to do it, and be sure of getting away again unobserved afterwards.

At twelve-thirty sharp he wrapped up the alarm-clock in ordinary brown paper, tucked it under his arm, and left his shop. He left it every day at this time to go to his own lunch. He would be a little longer getting back today, that was all. He locked the door carefully after him, of course; no use taking chances, he had too many valuable watches in there under repair and observation.

He boarded the bus at the corner below, just like he did every day when he was really going home for the night. There was no danger of being recognized or identified by any bus-driver or fellow-passenger or anything like that, this was too big a city. Hundreds of people used these busses night and day. The drivers didn't even glance up at you when you paid your fare, deftly made change for you back-hand by

their sense of touch on the coin you gave them alone. The bus was practically empty, no one was going out his way at this hour of the day.

He got off at his usual stop, three interminable suburban blocks away from where he lived, which was why his house had not been a particularly good investment when he bought it and no others had been put up around it afterwards. But it had its compensations on such a day as this. There were no neighbors to glimpse him returning to it at this unusual hour, from their windows, and remember that fact afterwards. The first of the three blocks he had to walk had a row of taxpayers on it, one-story store-fronts. The next two were absolutely vacant from corner to corner, just a panel of advertising billboards on both sides, with their gallery of friendly people that beamed on him each day twice a day. Incurable optimists these people were; even today when they were going to be shattered and splintered they continued to grin and smirk their counsel and messages of cheer. The perspiring bald-headed fat man about to quaff some non-alcoholic beverage. "The pause that freshes!" The grinning colored laundress hanging up wash. "No ma'am, I just uses a little Oxydol." The farm wife at the rural telephone sniggering over her shoulder: "Still talking about their new Ford 8!" They'd be tatters and kindling in two hours and they didn't have sense enough to get down and hurry away.

"You'll wish you had," he whispered darkly as he passed by beneath them, clock under arm.

But the point was, that if ever a man walked three "city" blocks in broad daylight unseen by the human eye, he did that now. He turned in the short cement walk when he came to his house at last, pulled back the screen door, put his latchkey into the wooden inner door and let himself in. She wasn't home, of course; he'd known she wouldn't be, or he wouldn't have come back like this.

He closed the door again after him, moved forward into the blue twilight-dimness of the inside of the house. It seemed like that at first after the glare of the street. She had the green shades down three-quarters of the way on all the windows to keep it cool until she came back. He didn't take his hat off or anything, he wasn't staying. Particularly after he once set this clock he was carrying in motion. In fact it was going to be a creepy feeling even walking back those three blocks to the bus-stop and standing waiting for the bus to take him downtown again, knowing all the time something was going *tick-tock, tick-tock* in the stillness back here, even though it wouldn't happen for a couple of hours yet.

He went directly to the door leading down to the basement. It was a good stout wooden door. He passed through it, closed it behind him, and went down the bare brick steps to the basement-floor. In the winter,

of course, she'd had to come down here occasionally to regulate the oil-burner while he was away, but after the fifteenth of April no one but himself ever came down here at any time, and it was now long past the fifteenth of April.

She hadn't even known that he'd come down, at that. He'd slipped down each night for a few minutes while she was in the kitchen doing the dishes, and by the time she got through and came out, he was upstairs again behind his newspaper. It didn't take long to add the contents of each successive little package to what was already in the box. The wiring had taken more time, but he'd gotten that done one night when she'd gone out to the movies (so she'd said — and then had been very vague about what the picture was she'd seen, but he hadn't pressed her).

The basement was provided with a light-bulb over the stairs, but it wasn't necessary to use it except at night; daylight was admitted through a horizontal slit of window that on the outside was flush with the ground, but on the inside was up directly under the basement-ceiling. The glass was wire-meshed for protection and so cloudy with lack of attention as to be nearly opaque.

The box, that was no longer merely a box now but an infernal machine, was standing over against the wall, to one side of the oil-burner. He didn't dare shift it about any more now that it was

wired and the batteries inserted. He went over to it and squatted down on his heels before it and put his hand on it with a sort of loving gesture. He was proud of it, prouder than of any fine watch he'd ever repaired or reconstructed. A watch, after all, was inanimate. This was going to become animate in a few more minutes, maybe diabolically so, but animate just the same. It was like — giving birth.

He unwrapped the clock and spread out the few necessary small implements he'd brought with him from the shop on the floor beside him. Two fine copper wires were sticking stiffly out of a small hole he'd bored in the box, in readiness, like the antennae of some kind of insect. Through them death would go in.

He wound the clock up first, for he couldn't safely do that once it was connected. He wound it up to within an inch of its life, with a professionally deft economy of wrist-motion. Not for nothing was he a watch-repairer. It must have sounded ominous down in that hushed basement, to hear that *crick-craaaack, crick-craaaack*, that so-domestic sound that denotes going to bed, peace, slumber, security; that this time denoted approaching annihilation. It would have if there'd been any listener. There wasn't any but himself. It didn't sound ominous to him, it sounded delicious.

He set the alarm for three. But there was a difference now. Instead

of just setting off a harmless bell when the hour hand reached three and the minute hand reached twelve, the wires attached to it leading to the batteries would set off a spark. A single, tiny, evanescent spark — that was all. And when that happened, all the way downtown where his shop was, the showcase would vibrate, and maybe one or two of the more delicate watch-mechanisms would stop. And people on the streets would stop and ask one another: "What was that?"

They probably wouldn't even be able to tell definitely, afterwards, that there'd been anyone else beside herself in the house at the time. They'd know that she'd been there only by a process of elimination; she wouldn't be anywhere else afterwards. They'd know that the house had been there only by the hole in the ground and the litter around.

He wondered why more people didn't do things like this; they didn't know what they were missing. Probably not clever enough to be able to make the things themselves, that was why.

When he'd set the clock itself by his own pocket-watch — 1:15 — he pried the back off it. He'd already bored a little hole through this at his shop. Carefully he guided the antenna-like wires through it, more carefully still he fastened them to the necessary parts of the mechanism without letting a tremor course along them. It was highly dangerous but his hands didn't play him false, they

were too skilled at this sort of thing. It wasn't vital to reattach the back to the clock, the result would be the same if it stood open or closed but he did that too, to give the sense of completion to the job that his craftsman's soul found necessary. When he had done with it, it stood there on the floor, as if placed there at random up against an innocent-looking copper-lidded soapbox, ticking away. Ten minutes had gone by since he had come down here. One hour and forty minutes were still to go by.

Death was on the wing.

He stood up and looked down at his work. He nodded. He retreated a step across the basement floor, still looking down, and nodded again, as if the slight perspective gained only enhanced it. He went over to the foot of the stairs leading up, and stopped once more and looked over. He had very good eyes. He could see the exact minute-notches on the dial all the way over where he now was. One had just gone by.

He smiled a little and went on up the stairs, not furtively or fearfully but like a man does in his own house, with an unhurried air of ownership, head up, shoulders back, tread firm.

He hadn't heard a sound over his head while he was down there, and you could hear sounds quite easily through the thin flooring, he knew that by experience. Even the opening and closing of doors above could be heard down here, certainly the footsteps of anyone walking about in the ground-floor rooms if they bore

down with their normal weight. And when they stood above certain spots and spoke, the sound of the voices and even what was said came through clearly, due to some trick of acoustics. He'd heard Lowell Thomas clearly, on the radio, while he was down here several times.

That was why he was all the more unprepared, as he opened the basement door and stepped out into the ground-floor hall, to hear a soft tread somewhere up above, on the second floor. A single, solitary footfall, separate, disconnected, like Robinson Crusoe's footprint. He stood stock-still a moment, listening tensely, thinking — hoping, rather, he'd been mistaken. But he hadn't. The slur of a bureau-drawer being drawn open or closed reached him, and then a faint tinkling sound as though something had lightly struck one of the glass toilet-articles on Fran's dresser.

Who else could it be but she? And yet there was a stealth to these vague disconnected noises that didn't sound like her. He would have heard her come in; her high heels usually exploded along the hardwood floors like little firecrackers.

Some sixth sense made him turn suddenly and look behind him, toward the dining-room, and he was just in time to see a man, half-crouched, shoulders bunched forward, creeping up on him. He was still a few yards away, beyond the dining-room threshold, but before Stapp could do more than drop open his mouth with reflex astonishment,

he had closed in on him, caught him brutally by the throat with one hand, flung him back against the wall, and pinned him there.

"What are you doing here?" Stapp managed to gasp out.

"Hey, Bill, somebody *is* home!" the man called out guardedly. Then he struck out at him, hit him a stunning blow on the side of the head with his free hand. Stapp didn't reel because the wall was at the back of his head, that gave him back the blow doubly, and his senses dulled into a whirling flux for a minute.

Before they had cleared again, a second man had leaped down off the stairs from one of the rooms above, in the act of finishing cramming something into his pocket.

"You know what to do, hurry up!" the first one ordered. "Get me something to tie him with and let's get out of here!"

"For God's sake, don't tie—!" Stapp managed to articulate through the strangling grip on his windpipe. The rest of it was lost in a blur of frenzied struggle on his part, flailing out with his legs, clawing at his own throat to free it. He wasn't fighting the man off, he was only trying to tear that throttling impediment off long enough to get out what he had to tell them, but his assailant couldn't tell the difference. He struck him savagely a second and third time, and Stapp went limp there against the wall without altogether losing consciousness.

The second one had come back

already with a rope, it looked like Fran's clothesline from the kitchen, that she used on Monday. Stapp, head falling forward dazedly upon the pinioning arm that still had him by the jugular, was dimly aware of this going around and around him, crisscross, in and out, legs and body and arms.

"Don't —" he panted. His mouth was suddenly nearly torn in two, and a large handkerchief or rag was thrust in, effectively silencing all further sound. Then they whipped something around outside of that, to keep it in, and fastened it behind his head. His senses were clearing again, now that it was too late.

"Fighter, huh?" one of them muttered grimly. "What's he protecting? The place is a lemon, there's nothing in it."

Stapp felt a hand spade into his vest-pocket, take his watch out. Then into his trouser-pocket and remove the little change he had on.

"Where'll we put him?"

"Leave him where he is."

"Naw. I did my last stretch just on account of leaving a guy in the open where he could put a squad-car on my tail too quick; they nabbed me a block away. Let's shove *him back* down in there where he was."

This brought on a new spasm, almost epileptic in its violence. He squirmed and writhed and shook his head back and forth. They had picked him up between them now, head and feet, kicked the basement door open, and were carrying him

down the steps to the bottom. They still couldn't be made to understand that he wasn't resisting, that he wouldn't call the police, that he wouldn't lift a finger to have them apprehended — if they'd only let him get out of here, *with* them.

"This is more like it," one said, as they deposited him on the floor. "Whoever lives in the house with him won't find him so quick —"

Stapp started to roll his head back and forth on the floor like something demented, toward the clock, then toward them, toward the clock, toward them. But so fast that it finally lost all possible meaning, even if it would have had any for them in the first place, and it wouldn't have of course. They still thought he was trying to free himself in unconquerable opposition.

"Look at that!" one of them jeered. "Did you ever see anyone like him in your life?" He backed his arm threateningly at the wriggling form, "I'll give you one that'll hold you for good, if you don't cut it out!"

"Tie him up to that pipe over there in the corner," his companion suggested, "or he'll wear himself out rolling all over the place." They dragged him backwards along the floor and lashed him in a sitting position, legs out before him, with an added length of rope that had been coiled in the basement.

Then they brushed their hands ostentatiously and started up the basement stairs again, one behind the

other, breathing hard from the struggle they'd had with him. "Pick up what we got and let's blow," one muttered. "We'll have to pull another one tonight — and this time you let *me* do the picking!"

"It looked like the berries," his mate alibied. "No one home, and standing away off by itself like it is."

A peculiar sound like the low simmering of a tea-kettle or the mewling of a newborn kitten left out in the rain to die came percolating thinly through the gag in Stapp's mouth. His vocal cords were strained to bursting with the effort it was costing him to make even that slight sound. His eyes were round and staring, fastened on them in horror and imploring.

They saw the look as they went on up, but couldn't read it. It might have been just the physical effort of trying to burst his bonds, it might have been rage and threatened retribution, for all they knew.

The first passed obliviously through the basement doorway and passed from sight. The second stopped halfway to the top of the stairs and glanced complacently back at him — the way he himself had looked back at his own handiwork just now, short minutes ago.

"Take it easy," he jeered, "relax. I used to be a sailor. You'll never get out of *them* knots, buddy."

Stapp swiveled his skull desperately, threw his eyes at the clock one last time. They almost started out of their sockets.

This time the man got it finally, but got it wrong. He flung his arm at him derisively. "Trying to tell me you got a date? Oh no you haven't, you only think you have! Whadda you care what time it is, *you're* not going any place!"

And then with the horrible slowness of a nightmare — though it only seemed that way, for he resumed his ascent fairly briskly — his head went out through the doorway, his shoulders followed, his waist next. Now even optical communications were cut off between them, and if only Stapp had had a minute more he might have made him understand! There was only one backthrust foot left in sight now, poised on the top-most basement step to take flight. Stapp's eyes were on it as though their burning plea could hold it back. The heel lifted up, it rose, trailed through after the rest of the man, was gone.

Stapp heaved himself so violently, as if to go after it by sheer will-power, that for a moment his whole body was a distended bow, clear of the floor from shoulders to heels. Then he fell flat again with a muffled thud, and a little dust came out from under him, and a half-dozen little separate skeins of sweat started down his face at one time, crossing and intercrossing as they coursed. The basement door ebbed back into its frame and the latch dropped into its socket with a minor click that to him was like the crack of doom.

In the silence now, above the surge

of his own tidal breathing that came and went like surf upon a shoreline, was the counterpart of the clock. Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.

For a moment or two longer he drew what consolation he could from the knowledge of their continued presence above him. An occasional stealthy footfall here and there, never more than one in succession, for they moved with marvelous dexterity, they must have had a lot of practice in breaking and entering. They were very cautious walkers from long habit even when there was no further need for it. A single remark filtered through, from somewhere near the back door. "All set? Let's take it this way." The creak of a hinge, and then the horrid finality of a door closing after them, the back door, which Fran may have forgotten to lock and by which they had presumably entered in the first place; and then they were gone.

And with them went his only link with the outside world. They were the only two people in the whole city who knew where he was at this moment. No one else, not a living soul, knew where to find him. Nor what would happen to him if he wasn't found and gotten out of here by three o'clock. It was twenty-five to two now. His discovery of their presence, the fight, their trussing him up with the rope, and their final unhurried departure, had all taken place within fifteen minutes.

It went tick-tick, tick-tock, tick-

tick, tick-tock, so rhythmically, so remorselessly, so *fast*.

An hour and twenty-five minutes left. Eighty-five minutes left. How long that could seem if you were waiting for someone on a corner, under an umbrella, in the rain — like he had once waited for Fran outside the office where she worked before they were married, only to find that she'd been taken ill and gone home early that day. How long that could seem if you were stretched out on a hospital-bed with knife-pains in your head and nothing to look at but white walls, until they brought your next tray — as he had been that time of the concussion. How long that could seem when you'd finished the paper, and one of the tubes had burned out in the radio, and it was too early to go to bed yet. How short, how fleeting, how instantaneous, that could seem when it was all the time there was left for you to live in and you were going to die at the end of it!

No clock had ever gone this fast, of all the hundreds that he'd looked at and set right. This was a demon-clock, its quarter-hours were minutes and its minutes seconds. Its lesser hand didn't even pause at all on those notches the way it should have, passed on from one to the next in perpetual motion. It was cheating him, it wasn't keeping the right time, somebody slow it down at least if nothing else! It was twirling like a pinwheel, that secondary hand.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock. He

broke it up into "Here I go, here I go, here I go."

There was a long period of silence that seemed to go on forever after the two of them had left. The clock told him it was only twenty-one minutes. Then at four to two a door opened above without warning — oh blessed sound, oh lovely sound! — the front door this time (over above *that* side of the basement), and high-heeled shoes clacked over his head like castanets.

"Fran!" he shouted. "Fran!" he yelled. "Fran!" he screamed. But all that got past the gag was a low whimper that didn't even reach across the basement. His face was dark with the effort it cost him, and a cord stood out at each side of his palpitating neck like a splint.

The tap-tap-tap went into the kitchen, stopped a minute (she was putting down her parcels; she didn't have things delivered because then you were expected to tip the errand-boys ten cents), came back again. If only there was something he could kick at with his interlocked feet, make a clatter with. The cellar-flooring was bare from wall to wall. He tried hoisting his lashed legs clear of the floor and pounding them down again with all his might; maybe the sound of the impact would carry up to her. All he got was a soft, cushioned sound, with twice the pain of striking a stone surface with your bare palm, and not even as much distinctness. His shoes were rubber-heeled, and he could not tilt them up

and around far enough to bring them down on the leather part above the lifts. An electrical discharge of pain shot up the backs of his legs, coursed up his spine, and exploded at the back of his head, like a brilliant rocket.

Meanwhile her steps had halted about where the hall closet was (she must be hanging up her coat), then went on toward the stairs that led to the upper floor, faded out upon them, going up. She was out of ear-shot now, temporarily. But she was in the house with him at least! That awful aloneness was gone. He felt such gratitude for her nearness, he felt such love and need for her, he wondered how he could ever have thought of doing away with her — only one short hour ago. He saw now that he must have been insane to contemplate such a thing. Well if he had been, he was sane now, he was rational now, this ordeal had brought him to his senses. Only release him, only rescue him from his jeopardy, and he'd never again . . .

Five-after. She'd been back nine minutes now. Then, it was ten. At first slowly, then faster and faster, terror, which had momentarily been quelled by her return, began to fasten upon him again. Why did she stay up there on the second floor like that? Why didn't she come down here to the basement, to look for something? Wasn't there anything down here that she might suddenly be in need of? He looked around, and there wasn't. There wasn't a pos-

sible thing that might bring her down here. They kept their basement so clean, so empty. Why wasn't it piled up with all sorts of junk like other people's! That might have saved him now.

She might intend to stay up there all afternoon! She might lie down and take a nap, she might shampoo her hair, she might do over an old dress. Any one of those trivial harmless occupations of a woman during her husband's absence could prove so fatal now! She might count on staying up there until it was time to begin getting his supper ready, and if she did — no supper, no she, no he.

Then a measure of relief came again. The man. The man whom he had intended destroying along with her, *he* would save him. He would be the means of his salvation. He came other days, didn't he, in the afternoon, while Stapp was away? Then, oh God, let him come today, make this one of the days they had a rendezvous (and yet maybe it just wasn't!) For if he came, that would bring her down to the lower floor, if only to admit him. And how infinitely greater his chances would be, with two pairs of ears in the house to overhear some wisp of sound he might make, than just with one.

And so he found himself in the anomalous position of a husband praying, pleading with every ounce of fervency he can muster, for the arrival, the materialization, of a rival whose existence he had only suspected

until now, never been positive of.

Eleven past two. Forty-nine minutes left. Less than the time it took to sit through the "A"-part of a picture-show. Less than the time it took to get a haircut, if you had to wait your turn. Less than the time it took to sit through a Sunday meal, or listen to an hour program on the radio, or ride on the bus from here to the beach for a dip. Less than all those things — to live. No, no, he had been meant to live thirty more years, forty! What had become of those years, those months, those weeks? No, not just *minutes* left, it wasn't fair!

"Fran!" he shrieked. "Fran, come down here! Can't you hear me?" The gag drank it up like a sponge.

The phone trilled out suddenly in the lower hallway, midway between him and her. He'd never heard such a beautiful sound before. "Thank God!" he sobbed, and a tear stood out in each eye. That must be the man now. That would bring her down.

Then fear again. Suppose it was only to tell her that he wasn't coming? Or worse still, suppose it was to ask her instead to come out and meet him somewhere else? Leave him alone down here, once again, with this horror ticking away opposite him. No child was ever so terrified of being left alone in the dark, of its parents putting out the light and leaving it to the mercy of the bogey-man as this grown man was at the thought of her going out of

the house and leaving him behind.

It kept on ringing a moment longer, and then he heard her quick step descending the stairs to answer it. He could hear every word she said down there where he was. These cheap matchwood houses.

"Hello? Yes, Dave. I just got in now."

Then, "Oh, Dave, I'm all upset. I had seventeen dollars upstairs in my bureau-drawer and it's gone, and the wrist-watch that Paul gave me is gone too. Nothing else is missing, but it looks to me as if someone broke in here while I was out and robbed us."

Stapp almost writhed with delight down there where he was. She knew they'd been robbed! She'd get the police now! Surely they'd search the whole place, surely they'd look down here and find him!

The man she was talking to must have asked her if she was sure. "Well, I'll look again, but I know it's gone. I know just where I left it, and it isn't there. Paul will have a fit."

No, Paul wouldn't either; if she'd only come down here and free him he'd forgive her anything, even the cardinal sin of being robbed of his hard-earned money.

Then she said, "No, I haven't reported it yet. I suppose I should, but I don't like the idea — on your account, you know. I'm going to call up Paul at the shop. There's just a chance that he took the money and the watch both with him when he left this morning. I remember telling

him the other night that it was losing time; he may have wanted to look it over. Well, all right, Dave, come on out then."

So he was coming, so Stapp wasn't to be left alone in the place; hot breaths of relief pushed against the sodden gag at the back of his palate.

There was a pause while she broke the connection. Then he heard her call his shop-number. "Trevelyan 4512," and wait while they were ringing, and of course no one answered.

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.

The operator must have told her finally that they couldn't get the number. "Well, keep ringing," he heard her say, "it's my husband's store, he's always there at this hour."

He screamed in terrible silence: "I'm right here under your feet! Don't waste time! For God's sake, come away from the phone, come down here!"

Finally, when failure was reported, a second time, she hung up. Even the hollow, cupping sound of that detail reached him. Oh, everything reached him — but help. This was a torture that a Grand Inquisitor would have envied.

He heard her steps move away from where the phone was. Wouldn't she guess by his absence from where he was supposed to be that something was wrong? Wouldn't she come down here now and look? (Oh, where was this woman's intuition they spoke about?) No, how could

she be expected to. What connection could the basement of their house possibly have in her mind with the fact that he wasn't in his shop? She wasn't even alarmed, so far, by his absence most likely. If it had been evening; but at this hour of the day — He might have gone out later than other days to his lunch, he might have had some errand to do.

He heard her going up the stairs again, probably to resume her search for the missing money and watch. He whimpered disappointedly. He was as cut off from her, while she remained up there, as if she'd been miles away, instead of being vertically over him in a straight line.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. It was twenty-one past two now. One half-hour and nine scant minutes more left. And they ticked away with the prodigality of tropical raindrops on a corrugated tin roof.

He kept straining and pulling away from the pipe that held him fast, then falling back exhausted, to rest awhile, to struggle and to strain some more. There was as recurrent a rhythm to it as there was to the ticking of the clock itself, only more widely spaced. How could ropes hold that unyieldingly? Each time he fell back weaker, less able to contend with them than the time before. For he wasn't little strands of hemp, he was layers of thin skin that broke one by one and gave forth burning pain and finally blood.

The doorbell rang out sharply. The man had come. In less than ten

minutes after their phone talk he had reached the house. Stapp's chest started rising and falling with renewed hope. Now his chances were good again. Twice as good as before, with two people in the house instead of only one. Four ears instead of two, to hear whatever slight sound he might manage to make. And he must, he must find a way of making one. He gave the stranger his benediction while he stood there waiting to be admitted. Thank God for this admirer or whatever he was, thank God for their rendezvous. He'd give them his blessing if they wanted it, all his worldly goods; anything, anything, if they'd only find him, free him.

She came quickly down the stairs a second time and her footfalls hurried down the hall. The front door opened. "Hello, Dave," she said, and he heard the sound of a kiss quite clearly. One of those loud unabashed ones that bespeak cordiality rather than intrigue.

A man's voice, deep, resonant, asked: "Well, did it turn up yet?"

"No, and I've looked high and low," he heard her say. "I tried to get Paul after I spoke to you, and he was out to lunch."

"Well, you can't just let seventeen dollars walk out the door without lifting your finger."

For seventeen dollars they were standing there frittering his life away — and their own too, for that matter, the fools!

"They'll think I did it, I suppose,"

he heard the man say with a note of bitterness.

"Don't say things like that," she reproved. "Come in the kitchen and I'll make you a cup of coffee."

Her quick brittle step went first, and his heavier, slower one followed. There was the sound of a couple of chairs being drawn out, and the man's footfalls died out entirely. Hers continued busily back and forth for a while, on a short orbit between stove and table.

What were they going to do, *sit* up there for the next half hour? Couldn't he *make* them hear in some way? He tried clearing his throat, coughing. It hurt furiously, because the lining of it was all raw from long strain. But the gag muffled even the cough to a blurred purring sort of sound.

Twenty-six to three. Only minutes left now, minutes; not even a full half-hour any more.

Her footsteps stopped finally and one chair shifted slightly as she joined him at the table. There was linoleum around the stove and sink that deadened sounds, but the middle part of the room where the table stood was ordinary pineboard flooring. It let things through with crystalline accuracy.

He heard her say, "Don't you think we ought to tell Paul about — us?"

The man didn't answer for a moment. Maybe he was spooning sugar, or thinking. Finally he asked, "What kind of a guy is he?"

"Paul's not narrow-minded," she said. "He's very fair and broad."

Even in his agony, Stapp was dimly aware of one thing: that didn't sound a bit like her. Not her speaking well of him, but that she could calmly, detachedly contemplate broaching such a topic to him. She had always seemed so proper and slightly prudish. This argued a sophistication that he hadn't known she'd had.

The man was evidently dubious about taking Paul into their confidence, at least he had nothing further to say. She went on, as though trying to convince him: "You have nothing to be afraid of on Paul's account, Dave, I know him too well. And don't you see, we can't keep on like this? It's better to go to him ourselves and tell him about you, than wait until he finds out. He's liable to think something else entirely, and keep it to himself, brood, hold it against me, unless we explain. I know that he didn't believe me that night when I helped you find a furnished room and told him I'd been to a movie. And I'm so nervous and upset each time he comes home in the evening, it's a wonder he hasn't noticed it before now. Why I feel as guilty as if — as if I were one of these disloyal wives or something." She laughed embarrassedly, as if apologizing to him for even bringing such a comparison up.

What did she mean by that?

"Didn't you ever tell him about me at all?"

"You mean in the beginning? Oh, I told him you'd been in one or two scrapes, but like a little fool I let him think I'd lost track of you, didn't know where you were any more."

Why, that was her brother she'd said that about!

The man sitting up there with her confirmed it right as the thought burst in his mind. "I know it's tough on you, Sis. You're happily married and all that. I've no right to come around and gum things up for you. No one's proud of a jailbird, an escaped convict, for a brother —"

"David," he heard her say, and even through the flooring there was such a ring of earnestness in her voice Stapp could almost visualize her reaching across the table and putting her hand reassuringly on his, "there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, and you should know that by now. Circumstances have been against you, that's all. You shouldn't have done what you did, but that's spilt milk and there's no use going back over it now."

"I suppose I'll have to go back and finish it out. Seven years, though, Fran, seven years out of a man's life —"

"But this way you have no life at all —"

Were they going to keep on talking his life away? Nineteen to three. One quarter of an hour, and four minutes over!

"Before you do anything, let's go downtown and talk it over with Paul,

hear what he says." One chair jarred back, then the other. He could hear dishes clatter, as though they'd all been lumped together in one stack. "I'll do these when I come back," she remarked.

Were they going to leave again? Were they going to leave him behind here, alone, with only minutes to spare?

Their footsteps had come out into the hall now, halted a moment undecidedly. "I don't like the idea of you being seen with me on the streets in broad daylight, you could get in trouble yourself, you know. Why don't you phone him to come out here instead?"

Yes, yes, Stapp wailed. Stay with me! Stay!

"I'm not afraid," she said gallantly. "I don't like to ask him to leave his work at this hour, and I can't tell him over the phone. Wait a minute, I'll get my hat." Her footsteps diverged momentarily from his, rejoined them again.

Panic-stricken, Stapp did the only thing he could think of. Struck the back of his own head violently against the thick pipe he was attached to.

A sheet of blue flame darted before his eyes. He must have hit one of the welts where he had already been struck once by the burglars. The pain was so excruciating he knew he couldn't repeat the attempt. But they must have heard something, some dull thud of reverberation must have carried up along the pipe.

He heard her stop short for a minute and say, "What was that?"

And the man, duller-sensed than she and killing him all unknowingly, "What? I didn't hear anything."

She took his word for it, went on again, to the hall-closet to get her coat. Then her footsteps retraced themselves all the way back through the dining-room to the kitchen. "Wait a minute, I want to make sure this back door's shut tight. Locking the stable after the horse is gone!"

She came forward again through the house for the last time, there was the sound of the front door opening, she passed through it, the man passed through it, it closed, and they were gone. There was the faint whirr of a car starting up outside in the open.

And now he was left alone with his self-fashioned doom a second time, and the first seemed a paradise in retrospect compared to this, for then he had a full hour to spare, he had been rich in time, and now he only had fifteen minutes, one miserly quarter-hour.

There wasn't any use struggling any more. He'd found that out long ago. He couldn't anyway, even if he'd wanted to. Flames seemed to be licking lazily around his wrists and ankles.

He'd found a sort of palliative now, the only way there was left. He'd keep his eyes down and pretend the hands were moving slower than they were, it was better than watching them constantly, it blunted

a little of the terror at least. The ticking he couldn't hide from. Of course every once in a while when he couldn't resist looking up and verifying his own calculations, there'd be a renewed burst of anguish, but in-between-times it made it more bearable to say, "It's only gained a half-minute since the last time I looked." Then he'd hold out as long as he could with his eyes down, but when he couldn't stand it any more and would have to raise them to see if he was right, it had gained *two* minutes. Then he'd have a bad fit of hysterics, in which he called on God, and even on his long-dead mother, to help him, and couldn't see straight through the tears. Then he'd pull himself together again, in a measure, and start the self-deception over again. "It's only about thirty seconds now since I last looked. . . . Now it's about a minute . . ." (But was it? But was it?) And so on, mounting slowly to another climax of terror and abysmal collapse.

Then suddenly the outside world intruded again, that world that he was so cut off from that it already seemed as far away, as unreal, as if he were already dead. The doorbell rang out.

He took no hope from the summons at first. Maybe some peddler — no, that had been too aggressive to be a peddler's ring. It was the sort of ring that claimed admission as its right, not as a favor. It came again. Whoever ringing was truculently impatient at being kept waiting. A

third ring was given the bell, this time a veritable blast that kept on for nearly half-a-minute. The party must have kept his finger pressed to the bell-button the whole time. Then as the peal finally stopped, a voice called out forcefully: "Anybody home in there? Gas Company!" And suddenly Stapp was quivering all over, almost whinnying in his anxiety.

This was the one call, the one incident in all the day's domestic routine, from earliest morning until latest night, that could have possibly brought anyone down into the basement! The meter was up there on the wall, beside the stairs, staring him in the face! And her brother had had to take her out of the house at just this particular time! There was no one to let the man in.

There was the impatient shuffle of a pair of feet on the cement walk. The man must have come down off the porch to gain perspective with which to look inquiringly up at the second-floor windows. And for a fleeting moment, as he chafed and shifted *about* out there before the house, on the walk and off, Stapp actually glimpsed the blurred shanks of his legs standing before the grimy transom that let light into the basement at ground level. All the potential savior had to do was crouch down and peer in through it, and he'd see him tied up down there. And the rest would be so easy!

Why didn't he? why didn't he? But evidently he didn't expect any-

one to be in the basement of a house in which his triple ring went unanswered. The tantalizing trouser-leg shifted out of range again, the transom became blank. A little saliva filtered through the mass of rag in Stapp's distended mouth, trickled across his silently vibrating lower lip.

The gas inspector gave the bell one more try, as if venting his disappointment at being balked rather than in any expectation of being admitted this late in the proceedings. He gave it innumerable short jabs, like a telegraph-key. Bip-bip-bip-bip-bip. Then he called out disgustedly, evidently for the benefit of some unseen assistant waiting in a truck out at the curb. "They're never in when you want 'em to be!" There was a single quick tread on the cement, away from the house. Then the slur of a light truck being driven off.

Stapp died a little. Not metaphorically, literally. His arms and legs got cold up to the elbows and knees, his heart seemed to beat slower, and he had trouble getting a full breath; more saliva escaped and ran down his chin, and his head drooped forward and lay on his chest for awhile, inert.

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. It brought him to after awhile, as though it were something beneficent, smelling salts or ammonia, instead of being the malevolent thing it was.

He noticed that his mind was starting to wander. Not much, as yet, but

every once in a while he'd get strange fancies. One time he thought that his *face* was the clock-dial, and that thing he kept staring at over there was his face. The pivot in the middle that held the two hands became his nose, and the 10 and the 2, up near the top, became his eyes, and he had a red-tin beard and head of hair and a little round bell on the exact top of his crown for a hat. "Gee, I look funny," he sobbed drowsily. And he caught himself twitching the muscles of his face, as if trying to stop those two hands that were clasped on it before they progressed any further and killed that man over there, who was breathing so metallically: tick, tock, tick, tock.

Then he drove the weird notion away again, and he saw that it had been just another escape-mechanism. Since he couldn't control the clock over there, he had attempted to change it into something else. Another vagary was that this ordeal had been brought on him as punishment for what he had intended doing to Fran, that he was being held fast there not by the inanimate ropes but by some active, punitive agency, and that if he exhibited remorse, pledged contrition to a proper degree, he could automatically effect his release at its hands. Thus over and over he whined in the silence of his throttled throat, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Just let me go this one time, I've learned my lesson, I'll never do it again."

The outer world returned again. This time it was the phone. It must be Fran and her brother, trying to find out if he'd come back here in their absence. They'd found the shop closed, must have waited outside of it for a while, and then when he still didn't come, didn't know what to make of it. Now they were calling the house from a booth down there, to see if he had been taken ill, had returned there in the meantime. When no one answered, that would tell them, surely, that something was wrong. Wouldn't they come back now to find out what had happened to him?

But why should they think he was here in the house if he didn't answer the phone? How could they dream he was in the basement the whole time? They'd hang around outside the shop some more waiting for him, until as time went on, and Fran became real worried, maybe they'd go to the police. (But that would be hours from now, what good would it do?) They'd look everywhere but here for him. When a man is reported missing the last place they'd look for him would be in his own home.

It stopped ringing finally, and its last vibration seemed to hang tenuously on the lifeless air long after it had ceased, humming outward in a spreading circle like a pebbledropped into a stagnant pool. *Mmmmmmmmmmm* until it was gone, and silence came rolling back in its wake.

She would be outside the pay-booth or wherever it was she had

called from, by this time. Rejoining her brother, where he had waited. Reporting, "He's not out at the house either." Adding the mild, still unworried comment, "Isn't that strange? Where on earth can he have gone?" Then they'd go back and wait outside the locked shop, at ease, secure, unendangered. She'd tap her foot occasionally in slight impatience, look up and down the street while they chatted.

And now *they* would be two of those casuals who would stop short and say to one another at three o'clock: "What was that?" And Fran might add, "It sounded as though it came from out our way." That would be the sum-total of their comment on his passing.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock. Nine minutes to three. Oh, what a lovely number was nine. Let it be nine forever, not eight or seven, nine for all eternity. Make time stand still, that he might breathe through all the world around him stagnated, rotted away. But no, it was already eight. The hand had bridged the white gap between the two black notches. Oh, what a precious number was eight, so rounded, so symmetrical. Let it be eight forever —

A woman's voice called out in sharp reprimand, somewhere outside in the open: "Be careful what you're doing, Bobby, you'll break a window!" She was some distance away, but the ringing dictatorial tones carried clearly.

Stapp saw the blurred shape of a

ball strike the basement-transom, he was looking up at it, for her voice had come in to him through there. It must have been just a tennis-ball, but for an instant it was outlined black against the soiled pane, like a small cannonball: it seemed to hang there suspended, to adhere to the glass, then it dropped back to the ground. If it had been ordinary glass it might have broken it, but the wire-mesh had prevented that.

The child came close up against the transom to get its ball back. It was such a small child that Stapp could see its entire body within the height of the pane, only the head was cut off. It bent over to pick up the ball, and then its head came into range too. It had short golden ringlets all over it. Its profile was turned toward him, looking down at the ball. It was the first human face he'd seen since he'd been left where he was. It looked like an angel. But an inattentive, unconcerned angel.

It saw something else while it was still bent forward close to the ground, a stone or something that attracted it, and picked that up too and looked at it, still crouched over, then finally threw it recklessly away over its shoulder, whatever it was.

The woman's voice was nearer at hand now, she must be strolling along the sidewalk directly in front of the house. "Bobby, stop throwing things like that, you'll hit somebody!"

If it would only turn its head over this way, it could look right in,

it could see him. The glass wasn't too smeary for that. He started to weave his head violently from side to side, hoping the flurry of motion would attract it, catch its eye. It may have, or its own natural curiosity may have prompted it to look in without that. Suddenly it had turned its head and was looking directly in through the transom. Blankly at first, he could tell by the vacant expression of its eyes.

Faster and faster he swiveled his head. It raised the heel of one chubby, fumbling hand and scoured a little clear spot to squint through. Now it could see him, now surely! It still didn't for a second. It must be much darker in here than outside, and the light was behind it.

The woman's voice came in sharp reproof: "Bobby, what are you doing there?"

And then suddenly it saw him. The pupils of its eyes shifted over a little, came to rest directly on him. Interest replaced blankness. Nothing is strange to children — not a man tied up in a cellar any more than anything else — yet everything is. Everything creates wonder, calls for comment, demands explanation. Wouldn't it say anything to her? Couldn't it talk? It must be old enough to; she, its mother, was talking to it incessantly. "Bobby, come away from there!"

"Mommy, look!" it said gleefully.

Stapp couldn't see it clearly any more, he was shaking his head so fast. He was dizzy, like you are when

you've just gotten off a carrousel; the transom and the child it framed kept swinging about him in a half-circle, first too far over on one side, then too far over on the other.

But wouldn't it understand, wouldn't it understand that weaving of the head meant he wanted to be free? Even if ropes about the wrists and ankles had no meaning to it, if it couldn't tell what a bandage around the mouth was, it must know that when anyone writhed like that they wanted to be let loose. Oh God, if it had only been two years older, three at the most! A child of eight, these days, would have understood and given warning.

"Bobby, are you coming? I'm waiting!"

If he could only get its attention, keep it rooted there long enough in disobedience to her, surely she'd come over and get it, see him herself as she irritably sought to ascertain the reason for its fascination.

He rolled his eyes at it in desperate comicality, winked them, blinked them, crossed them. An elfin grin peered out on its face at this last; already it found humor in a physical defect, or the assumption of one, young as it was.

An adult hand suddenly darted downward from the upper right-hand corner of the transom, caught its wrist, bore its arm upward out of sight. "Mommy, look!" it said again, and pointed with its other hand. "Funny man, tied up."

The adult voice, reasonable, logi-

cal, dispassionate — inattentive to a child's fibs and fancies — answered: "Why that wouldn't look nice, Mommy can't peep into other people's houses like you can."

The child was tugged erect at the end of its arm, its head disappeared above the transom. Its body was pivoted around, away from him; he could see the hollows at the back of its knees for an instant longer, then its outline on the glass blurred in withdrawal, it was gone. Only the little clear spot it had scoured remained to mock him in his crucifixion.

The will to live is an unconquerable thing. He was more dead than alive by now, yet presently he started to crawl back again out of the depths of his despair, a slower longer crawl each time, like that of some indefatigable insect buried repeatedly in sand, that each time manages to burrow its way out.

He rolled his head away from the window back toward the clock finally. He hadn't been able to spare a look at it during the whole time the child was in sight. And now to his horror it stood at three to three. There was a fresh, a final blotting-out of the burrowing insect that was his hopes, as if by a cruel idler lounging on a beach.

He couldn't *feel* any more, terror or hope or anything else. A sort of numbness had set in, with a core of gleaming awareness remaining that was his mind. *That* would be all that the detonation would be able to blot

out by the time it came. It was like having a tooth extracted with the aid of novocain. There remained of him now only this single pulsing nerve of premonition; all the tissue around it was frozen. So protracted foreknowledge of death was in itself its own anæsthetic.

Now it would be too late even to attempt to free him first, before stopping the thing. Just time enough, if someone came down those stairs this very minute, sharp-edged knife with which to sever his bonds already in hand, for him to throw himself over toward it, reverse it. And now — it was too late even for that, too late for anything but to die.

He was making animal-noises deep in his throat as the minute hand slowly blended with the notch of twelve. Guttural sounds like a dog worrying a bone. He puckered the flesh around his eyes apprehensively, creased them into slits — as though the closing of his eyes could ward off, lessen, the terrific force of what was to come! Something deep within him seemed to retreat down long dim corridors away from the doom that impended. He hadn't known he had those convenient corridors of evasion in him, with their protective turns and angles by which to put distance between himself and menace. Oh clever architect of the Mind, that made such emergency exits available. Toward them this something, that was he and yet not he, rushed; toward sanctuary, security, waiting brightness, sunshine, laughter.

The hand on the dial stayed there, upright, perpendicular, a perfect right-angle to its corollary, while the swift seconds that were all there were left of existence ticked by and were gone. It wasn't so straight now any more, but he didn't know it, he was in a state of death already. White reappeared between it and the twelve-notch, *behind* it now. It was one minute after three. He was shaking all over from head to foot — not with fear, with laughter.

It broke into sound as they plucked the dampened, bloodied gag out, as though they were drawing the laughter out, by suction or osmosis.

"No, don't take those ropes off him yet!" the man in the white coat said sharply. "Wait'll they get here with the straitjacket first, or you'll have your hands full."

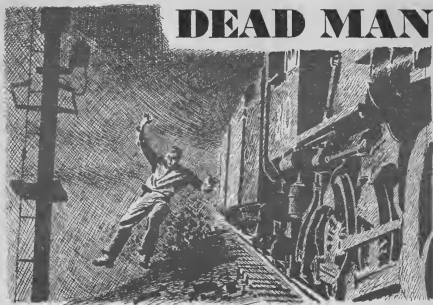
Fran said through her tears, cupping her hands to her ears, "Can't you stop him from laughing like that? I can't stand it. Why does he keep laughing like that?"

"He's out of his mind, lady."

The clock said five past seven. "What's in this box?" the cop asked, kicking at it idly with his foot. It shifted lightly along the wall a little, and took the clock with it.

"Nothing," Stapp's wife answered, through her sobs and above his incessant laughter. "Just an empty box. It used to have some kind of fertilizer in it, but I took it out and used it on the flowers I — I tried to raise out in back of the house."

DEAD MAN



HE FELT the train check, knew what it meant. In a moment, from up toward the engine, came the chant of the railroad detective: "Rise and shine, boys, rise and shine." The hoboes began dropping off. He could hear them out there in the dark, cursing as the train went by. That was what they always did on these freights: let the hoboes climb on in the yards, making no effort to dislodge them there; for that would have meant a foolish game of hide-and-seek between two or three detectives and two or three

They called him Lucky and the name fit. He'd killed a man and wasn't even suspected yet . . .

BY JAMES M. CAIN

hundred hoboes, with the hoboes swarming on as fast as the detectives put them off.

What they did was let the hoboes alone until the train was several miles under way; then they pulled down to a speed slow enough for men to drop off, but too fast for them to climb back on. Then the detective went down the line, brushing them off, like caterpillars from a twig. In two minutes they would all be ditched, a crowd of bitter men in a lonely spot; but they

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always cursed, always seemed surprised.

He crouched in the coal gondola and waited. He hadn't boarded a flat or a refrigerator with the others, back in the Los Angeles yards, tempting though that comfort was. He wasn't long on the road, and he still didn't like to mix with the other hoboes, admit he was one of them. Also, he couldn't shake off a notion that he was sharper than they were, that by playing a lone hand he might think of some magnificent trick that would defeat the detective, and thus, even at this ignoble trade, give him a sense of accomplishment, of being good at it. He had slipped into the gond not in spite of its harshness, but because of it: it was black, and would give him a chance to hide, and the detective, not expecting him there, might pass him by. He was nineteen years old, and was proud of the nickname they had given him in the poolroom back home. They called him Lucky.

"Rise and shine, boys, rise and shine."

Three dropped off the tank car ahead, and the detective climbed into the gond. The flashlight shot around, and Lucky held his breath. He had curled into one of the three chutes for unloading coal. The trick worked. These chutes were dangerous, for if you stepped into one and the bottom dropped, it would dump you under the train. The detective took no chances. He first shot the flash, then held on to the side while

he climbed over the chutes. When he came to the last one, where Lucky lay, he shot the flash, but carelessly, and not squarely into the hole, so that he saw nothing. Stepping over, he went on, climbed to the box car behind, and resumed his chant; there were more curses, more feet sliding on ballast on the roadbed outside. Soon the train picked up speed. That meant the detective had reached the caboose, that all the hoboes were cleared.

Lucky stood up, looked around. There was nothing to see, except hot-dog stands along the highway, but it was pleasant to poke your head up, let the wind whip your hair, and reflect how you had outwitted the detective. When the click of the rails slowed and station lights showed ahead, he squatted down again, dropped his feet into the chute. As soon as lights flashed alongside, he braced against the opposite side of the chute: that was one thing he had learned, the crazy way they shot the brakes on these freights. When the train jerked to a shrieking stop, he was ready, and didn't get slammed. The bell tolled, the engine pulled away, there was an interval of silence. That meant they had cut the train, and would be picking up more cars. Soon they would be going on.

"Ah-ha! Hiding out on me, hey?"

The flashlight shot down from the box car. Lucky jumped, seized the side of the gond, scrambled up, vaulted. When he hit the roadbed, his ankles stung from the impact,

and he staggered for footing. The detective was on him, grappling. He broke away, ran down the track, past the caboose, into the dark. The detective followed, but he was a big man and began to lose ground. Lucky was clear, when all of a sudden his foot drove against a switch bar and he went flat on his face, panting from the hysteria of shock.

The detective didn't grapple this time. He let go with a barrage of kicks.

"Hide out on me, will you? Treat you right, give you a break, and you hide out on me. I'll learn you to hide out on me."

Lucky tried to get up, couldn't. He was jerked to his feet, rushed up the track on the run. He pulled back, but couldn't get set. He sat down, dug in with his sliding heels. The detective kicked and jerked, in fury. Lucky clawed for something to hold on to, his hand caught the rail. The detective stamped on it. He pulled it back in pain, clawed again. This time his fingers closed on a spike, sticking an inch or two out of the tie. The detective jerked, the spike pulled out of the hole, and Lucky resumed his unwilling run.

"Lemme go! Why don't you lemme go?"

"Come on! Hide out on me, will you?—I'll learn you to hide out on Larry Nott!"

"Lemme go! Lemme —"

Lucky pulled back, braced with his heels, got himself stopped. Then his whole body coiled like a spring

and let go in one convulsive, passionate lunge. The spike, still in his hand, came down on the detective's head, and he felt it crush. He stood there, looking down at something dark and formless lying across the rails.

Hurrying down the track, he became aware of the spike, gave it a toss, heard it splash in the ditch. Soon he realized that his steps on the ties were being telegraphed by the listening rail, and he plunged across the ditch to the highway. There he resumed his rapid walk, trying not to run. But every time a car overtook him his heels lifted queerly, and his breath first stopped, then came in gasps as he listened for the car to stop. He came to a crossroads, turned quickly to his right. He let himself run here, for the road wasn't lighted as the main highway was, and there weren't many cars. The running tired him, but it eased the sick feeling in his stomach. He came to a sign that told him Los Angeles was 17 miles, and to his left. He turned, walked, ran, stooped down sometimes, panting, to rest. After a while it came to him why he had to get to Los Angeles, and so soon. The soup kitchen opened at seven o'clock. He had to be there, in that same soup kitchen where he had had supper, so it would look as though he had never been away.

When the lights went off, and it was broad daylight with the suddenness of Southern California, he was in the city, and a clock told him

it was ten minutes after five. He thought he had time. He pressed on, exhausted, but never relaxing his rapid, half-shuffling walk.

It was ten minutes to seven when he got to the soup kitchen, and he quickly walked past it. He wanted to be clear at the end of the line, so he could have a word with Shorty, the man who dished out the soup, without impatient shoves from behind, and growls to keep moving.

Shorty remembered him. "Still here, hey?"

"Still here."

"Three in a row for you. Holy Smoke, they ought be collecting for you by the month."

"Thought you'd be off."

"Who, me?"

"Sunday, ain't it?"

"Sunday? Wake up. This is Saturday."

"Saturday? You're kidding."

"Kidding my eye, this is Saturday, and a big day in this town, too."

"One day looks like another to me."

"Not this one. Parade."

"Yeah?"

"Shriners. You get that free."

"Well, that's my name, Lucky."

"My name's Shorty, but I'm over six feet."

"Nothing like that with me. I really got luck."

"You sure?"

"Like, for instance, getting a hunk of meat."

"I didn't give you no meat."

"Ain't you going to?"

"Shove your plate over quick. Don't let nobody see you."

"Thanks."

"Okay, Lucky. Don't miss the parade."

"I won't."

He sat at the rough table with the others, dipped his bread in the soup, tried to eat, but his throat kept contracting from excitement and he made slow work of it. He had what he wanted from Shorty. He had fixed the day, and not only the day but the date, for it would be the same date as the big Shriners' parade. He had fixed his name, with a little gag. Shorty wouldn't forget him. His throat relaxed, and he wolfed the piece of meat.

Near the soup kitchen he saw signs: "Lincoln Park Pharmacy", "Lincoln Park Cafeteria".

"Which way is the park, Buddy?"

If it was a big park, he might find a thicket where he could lie down, rest his aching legs.

"Straight down, you'll see it."

There was a fence around it, but he found a gate, opened it, slipped in. Ahead of him was a thicket, but the ground was wet from a stream that ran through it. He crossed a small bridge, followed a path. He came to a stable, peeped in. It was empty, but the floor was thickly covered with new hay. He went in, made for a dark corner, burrowed under the hay, closed his eyes. For a few moments everything slipped away, except warmth, relaxation,

case. But then something began to drill into the back of his mind: Where did he spend last night? Where would he tell them he spent last night? He tried to think, but nothing would come to him. He would have said that he spent it where he spent the night before, but he hadn't spent it in Los Angeles. He had spent it in Santa Barbara, and come down in the morning on a truck. He had never spent a night in Los Angeles. He didn't know the places. He had no answers to the questions that were now pounding at him like sledge-hammers:

"What's that? Where you say you was?"

"In a flophouse."

"Which flophouse?"

"I didn't pay no attention which flophouse. It was just a flophouse."

"Where was this flophouse at?"

"I don't know where it was at. I never been to Los Angeles before. I don't know the names of no streets."

"What this flophouse look like?"

"Looked like a flophouse."

"Come on, don't give us no gags. What this flophouse look like? Ain't you got eyes, can't you say what this here place looked like? What's the matter, can't you talk?"

Something gripped his arm, and he felt himself being lifted. Something of terrible strength had hold of him, and he was going straight up in the air. He squirmed to get loose, then was plopped on his feet and released. He turned, terrified.

An elephant was standing there,

exploring his clothes with its trunk. He knew then that he had been asleep. But when he backed away, he bumped into another elephant. He slipped between the two elephants, slithered past a third to the door, which was open about a foot. Out in the sunlight, he made his way back across the little bridge, saw what he hadn't noticed before: pens with deer in them, and ostriches, and mountain sheep, that told him he had stumbled into a zoo. It was after four o'clock, so he must have slept a long time in the hay. Back on the street, he felt a sobbing laugh rise in his throat. *That* was where he had spent the night. "In the elephant house at Lincoln Park."

"What?"

"That's right. In the elephant house."

"What you giving us? A stall?"

"It ain't no stall. I was in the elephant house."

"With them elephants?"

"That's right."

"How you get in there?"

"Just went in. The door was open."

"Just went in there, seen the elephants, and bedded down with them?"

"I thought they was horses."

"You thought them elephants was horses?"

"It was dark. I dug in under the hay. I never knowed they was elephants till morning."

"How come you went in there?"

"I left the soup kitchen, and in a couple of minutes I came to the park. I went in there, looking for some grass to lie down on. Then I come to this here place, looked to me like a stable. I peeped in, seen the hay, and hit it."

"And you wasn't scared of them elephants?"

"It was dark, I tell you, and I could hear them eating the hay, but I thought they was horses. I was tired, and I wanted some place to sleep."

"Then what?"

"Then when it got light, and I seen they was elephants, I run out of there, and beat it."

"Couldn't you tell them elephants by the smell?"

"I never noticed no smell."

"How many elephants was there?"

"Three."

He brushed wisps of hay off his denims. They had been fairly new, but now they were black with the grime of the coal gond. Suddenly his heart stopped, a suffocating feeling swept over him. The questions started again, hammered at him, beat into his brain.

"Where that coal dust come from?"

"I don't know. The freights, I guess."

"Don't you know it ain't no coal ever shipped into this part of the state? Don't you know that all they burn here is gas? Don't you know it ain't only been but one coal car shipped in here in six months, and

that come in by a misread train order? Don't you know that car was part of that train this here detective was riding that got killed? *Don't you know that?* Come on, out with it, WHERE THAT COAL DUST COME FROM?"

Getting rid of the denims instantly became an obsession. He felt that people were looking at him on the street, spying the coal dust, waiting till he got by, then running into drugstores to phone the police that he had just passed by. It was like those dreams he sometimes had, where he was walking through crowds naked, except that this was no dream, and he wasn't naked, he was wearing these denims, these tell-tale denims with coal dust all over them. He clenched his hands, had a moment of terrible concentration, headed into a filling station.

"Hello."

"Hello."

"What's the chances on a job?"

"No chances."

"Why not?"

"Don't need anybody."

"That's not the only reason."

"There's about forty-two other reasons, one of them is I can't even make a living myself, but it's all the reason that concerns you. Here's a dime, kid. Better luck somewhere else."

"I don't want your dime. I want a job. If the clothes were better, that might help, mightn't it?"

"If the clothes were good enough for Clark Gable in the swell gam-

bling house scene, that wouldn't help a bit. Not a bit. I just don't need anybody, that's all."

"Suppose I got better clothes. Would you talk to me?"

"Talk to you any time, but I don't need anybody."

"I'll be back when I get the clothes."

"Just taking a walk for nothing."

"What's your name?"

"Hook's my name. Oscar Hook."

"Thanks, Mr. Hook. But I'm coming back. I just got a idea I can talk myself into a job. I'm some talker."

"You're all of that, kid. But don't waste your time. I don't need anybody."

"Okay. Just the same, I'll be back."

He headed for the center of town, asked the way to the cheap clothing stores. At Los Angeles and Temple, after an hour's trudge, he came to a succession of small stores in a Mexican quarter that were what he wanted. He went into one. The storekeeper was a Mexican, and two or three other Mexicans were standing around, smoking.

"Mister, will you trust me for a pair of white pants and a shirt?"

"No trust. Hey, scam."

"Look. I can have a job Monday morning if I can show up in that outfit. White pants and a white shirt. That's all."

"No trust. What you think this is, anyway?"

"Well, I want to get that outfit

somewhere. If I get that, they'll let me go to work Monday, I'll pay you soon as I get paid off Saturday night."

"No trust. Sell for cash."

He stood there. The Mexicans stood there, smoked, looked out at the street. Presently one of them looked at him. "What kind of job, hey? What you mean, got to have white pants a white shirt a hold a job?"

"Filling station. They got a rule you got to have white clothes before you can work there."

"Oh. Sure. Filling station."

After a while the storekeeper spoke. "Ha! Is a joke. Job in filling station, must have a white pants, white shirt. Ha! Is a joke."

"What else would I want them for? Holy smoke, these are better for the road, ain't they? Say, a guy don't want white pants to ride freights, does he?"

"What filling station? Tell me that?"

"Guy name of Hook, Oscar Hook, got a Acme station, Main near Twentieth. You don't believe me, call him up."

"You go to work there, hey?"

"I'm *supposed* to go to work. I *told* him I'd get the white pants and white shirt, somehow. Well — if I don't get them, I don't go to work."

"Why you come to me, hey?"

"Where else would I go? If it's not you, it's another guy down the street. No place else I can dig up the stuff over Sunday, is there?"

"Oh."

He stood around. They all stood around. Then once again the storekeeper looked up. "What size you wear, hey?"

He had a wash at a tap in the back yard, then changed there, between piled-up boxes and crates. The storekeeper gave him a white shirt, white pants, necktie, a suit of thick underwear, and a pair of shoes to replace his badly-worn brogans. "Is pretty cold, night-time, now. A thick underwear feel better."

"Okay. Much obliged."

"Can roll this other stuff up."

"I don't want it. Can you throw it away for me?"

"Is pretty dirty."

"Plenty dirty."

"You no want?"

"No."

His heart leaped as the storekeeper dropped the whole pile into a rubbish brazier and touched a match to some papers at the bottom of it. In a few minutes, the denims and everything else he had worn were ashes.

He followed the storekeeper inside. "Okay, here is a bill, I put all a stuff on a bill, no charge you more than anybody else. Is six dollar ninety-eight cents, then is a service charge five dollar."

All of them laughed. He took the "service charge" to be a gyp overcharge to cover the trust. He nodded. "Okay on that charge."

The storekeeper hesitated. "Well, six ninety-eight. We no make a service charge."

"Thanks."

"See you keep a white pants clean till Monday morning."

"I'll do that. See you Saturday night."

"Adios."

Out in the street, he stuck his hand in his pocket, felt something, pulled it out. It was a \$5 bill. Then he understood about the "service charge", and why the Mexicans had laughed. He went back, kissed the bill, waved a cheery salute into the store. They all waved back.

He rode a streetcar down to Mr. Hook's, got turned down for the job, rode a streetcar back. In his mind, he tried to check over everything. He had an alibi, fantastic and plausible. So far as he could recall, nobody on the train had seen him, not even the other hoboes, for he had stood apart from them in the yards, and had done nothing to attract the attention of any of them. The denims were burned, and he had a story to account for the whites. It even looked pretty good, this thing with Mr. Hook, for anybody who had committed a murder would be most unlikely to make a serious effort to land a job.

But the questions lurked there, ready to spring at him, check and recheck as he would. He saw a sign, "5-Course Dinner, \$2.95." He still had \$4.80, and went in, ordered steak and fried potatoes, the hungry man's dream of heaven. He ate, put a quarter tip under the plate. He ordered cigarettes, lit one, inhaled.

He got up to go. A newspaper was lying on the table.

He froze as he saw the headline:

"L. R. NOTT, R. R. MAN,
KILLED."

On the street, he bought a paper, tried to open it under a street light, couldn't, tucked it under his arm. He found Highway 101, caught a hay truck bound for San Francisco. Going out Sunset Boulevard, it unexpectedly pulled over to the curb and stopped. He looked warily around. Down a side-street, about a block away, were the two green lights of a police station. He was tightening to jump and run, but the driver wasn't looking at the lights. "I told them bums that air hose was leaking. They set you nuts. Supposed to keep the stuff in shape but they sit around and play blackjack."

The driver got out. Lucky climbed down, walked to the glare of the headlights, opened his paper. There it was:

L. R. NOTT, R. R. MAN,
KILLED

The decapitated body of L. R. Nott, 1327 De Soto Street, a detective assigned to a northbound freight, was found early this morning on the track near San Fernando station. It is believed he lost his balance while the train was shunting cars at the San Fernando siding and fell beneath the wheels. Funeral services will be held tomorrow from the De Soto Street Methodist Church.

Mr. Nott is survived by a widow, formerly Miss Elsie Snowden of

Mannerheim, and a son, L. R. Nott Jr., 5.

He was clear, and he knew it. "*Boy, do they call you Lucky? I'll say it is.*"

He leaned against the trailer, let his eye wander down the street. He saw the two green lights of the police station — glowing. A queer feeling began to stir inside him.

He recognized that feeling now; it was the old Sunday-night feeling that he used to have back home, when the bells would ring and he would have to stop playing hide in the twilight, go to church, and hear about the necessity for being saved. It shot through his mind, how lonely he had felt, and how he had sneaked into church, and stood in the rear listening.

His eyes twitched back to the lights, and slowly, shakily, but unswervingly he walked toward them.

"I want to give myself up."

"Yeah, I know, you're wanted for grand larceny in Hackensack, N. J."

"No, I —"

"We quit giving them rides when the New Deal come in. Beat it."

"I killed a man."

"You —? . . . Where was it?"

"Near here. San Fernando . . ."

"Hey, wait till I get a card. . . . Okay, what's your name?"

"Ben Fuller."

"No middle name?"

"They call me Lucky."

"Lucky like in good luck?"

"Yes, sir. . . . Lucky like in good luck."

the amazing DIP

BY FREDRIC
BROWN



"You see, Mr. Gupstein, it wasn't the robberies that worried me. But when this guy started to put the stuff back . . ."

GOOD MORNING, Mr. Gupstein. My name is Wilson. Some of my friends around at police headquarters call me Slip Wilson; you know how those things get started.

You see, Mr. Gupstein, my regular lawyer gave me your name and suggested I see you if I needed anything while he was away. And I need legal advice.

No, my lawyer isn't on vacation. He's in jail, Mr. Gupstein.

But here's what I want to know. I've got a diamond stickpin with a stone about the size of a flashlight bulb. I want to find out if I can make a deal for nearly what it's worth or whether I'll have to push it through a fence for whatever I can get. The difference ought to amount to maybe a couple of grand, Mr. Gupstein.

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How'd I get it? Well, in a manner of speaking, Mr. Gupstein, it was given to me by a teacup. But that's hard for you to understand, so maybe I'd better start farther back.

I first saw this guy in the elevator at Brandon's. He was a big character, about six feet between the straps of his spats and the band of his derby. And big all over. He wasn't over twenty-five years old either.

But what made me notice him was his glims. He had the biggest, softest baby-blue eyes I ever saw. Honest, they made him look like a cherub out of a stained glass window. I guess I mean a cherub — you know, one of those plump little brats with wings sprouting from behind the ears?

No, Mr. Gupstein, he didn't have wings from behind his ears. I just mean he had that kind of eyes and that kind of a look in his face.

We both got off at the main floor, and I happened to reach into my pocket for my cigarettes. And they weren't there. I'd just put my cigarette case in that pocket when I'd got in the elevator, too. So I quick dived a hand into my inside pocket.

Yeah, my billfold was gone, too.

I don't know whether you can imagine just how that made me feel, Mr. Gupstein. Me, Slip Wilson, being picked clean like a visiting fireman! I hadn't even been bumped into, either, and the elevator hadn't been crowded. And I'd thought *I* was good!

Huh? Yeah, Mr. Gupstein, that's my profession. Until I got out of that elevator, I thought I was the best leathergoods worker this side of the Hudson Tunnel. You can figure how I felt. Me, Slip Wilson, picked cleaner than a mackerel in a home for undernourished cats.

Well, I took a quick gander around and I spotted my companion of the elevator ride disappearing through the door to the street. I hightailed after him.

A block farther on, where it wasn't so crowded, I caught up and asked him for a match. I'd forgotten for the moment that my cigarettes were gone and I didn't have anything to light with it, but he didn't seem to notice the difference.

I made a crack about the weather, and since we seemed to be going in the same direction, friendship ripened into thirst and I asked him to stop in at a tavern for a drink.

He paid for it, too, out of a wallet that needed reducing exercises. We agreed that the Scotch was lousy, so I invited him around to my apartment so I could show him the merits of my favorite brand. Funny, but we seemed to hit it off together from the start like bacon and eggs.

When we got there, he flops into my favorite chair, nearly breaking the springs, and makes himself at home.

"I say, old chap," he says. "We haven't introduced ourselves. My name is Cadwallader Van Aylslea."

Well, Mr. Gupstein, you've heard

of the Van Aylsleas; they own half this island and have a mortgage on more. Everytime Old Man Van Aylslea stubs his toe getting out of bed after breakfast, the market drops ten points.

So I grinned sarcastic at him. "Glad to know you, Cadwallader," I said. "I'm the Rajah of Rangoon."

Without batting an eye, he pipes up that he's glad to know me and how are things in my native land. For the first time, Mr. Gupstein, I began to suspect.

I'd been looking right into those baby-blue glims, and I could see he wasn't spoofing. He took himself at face value and he took me that way too. And I began to add up a few other little things he'd said, and I saw he was off his trolley.

But trolley or no, I wanted my money back. So I sort of accidentally got a couple of kayo drops tangled in his next Scotch. And I steered clear of doubtful topics of conversation until he leaned back in the chair and blinked a few times, and then closed his eyes and exposed his tonsils to the afternoon breeze.

I waited a few minutes to be sure, and then I put everything in his pockets into a neat little pile on the table.

Listen, Mr. Gupstein. There were seven billfolds, four of them fat ones. There were five watches, my cigarette case, and an assortment of junk ranging from a pair of pink garters to a bag of glass marbles. Not mentioning jewelry.

The billfolds added up to almost a grand, and what of the other stuff was valuable would have brought half of that from any fence this side of Maiden Lane.

To top it off there is a rock in his cravat that looks to be worth ten times all the rest of the haul put together. I'd noticed it before, of course, but it hadn't occurred to me that it might be the McCoy. But when I looked at it close, you could have knocked me down with a busted flush. It wasn't just a diamond, Mr. Gupstein. It was blue-white and flawless.

I put it with the rest and sat there looking at the pile goggle-eyed. If that was one day's haul, he was one of the seven wonders of the Bronx.

And all I had to do was let him sleep. All I had to do was wrap up my toothbrush, fill my pockets with the dough and the jewelry on the table, and head for Bermuda. With a grand in cash to buy pancakes until I could get a market for the rock.

All I had to do was blow. And I didn't.

I guess curiosity has hooked better guys than me, Mr. Gupstein. I wanted to know what it was all about. I had a roscoe that I never carried, and I got it out of mothballs, looked to the priming, and sat down. I was determined to find out who and what he was, and damn the torpedoes.

I guess his big bulk helped him to throw off the shuteye sooner than

most. It wasn't but an hour before he sat up and opened his eyes and began to rub his forehead.

"Funny," he muttered. "Sorry, but I must have dropped off. Horribly rude."

Then he lamped the pile of boodle on the table, and I tightened the grip on my roscoe. But he merely blinked.

"Where's all this stuff come from, Rajah?" His voice sounds as puzzled as his eyes look. "Why, some of it is mine." He reached over and picked up the fattest wallet, the diamond tiepin, and a few other trifles.

"It came out of your pockets, my fine-feathered friend," I assured him. "Before that, it seems to have come from a number of places."

He sighs. Then he looks at me like a dog that knows it needs a beating. "All right, Rajah," he says. "I may as well admit it. I'm a kleptomaniac. I take things and don't even know it. That's why I'm not allowed out at home. This morning I got away from them."

The eyes had me again. He was telling the truth, and he looked like a kid that expected to be told to go sit in a corner. And if *that* was true . . .

I sat up suddenly. An electric light seemed to be turned on inside my head. "Let me see that wallet you say is yours," I barked at him.

He handed it over like a lamb. I looked. Yes, Mr. Gupstein. Cadwallader Van Aylslea. Plenty of identification to prove it.

"Listen, Rajah," he was begging. "Don't send me back. They keep me a prisoner there. Let me stay here with you for a while, anyway, before I go back."

By that time I was pacing up and down the room. I had an idea, and my idea was having pups.

I looked at him for a long minute before I opened up.

"Listen, Cadwallader," I told him, "I'll let you stay here on a few terms. One is that you never go out unless we go together. If you happen to pinch anything, I'll take care of it and see that it goes back where it belongs. I'm a whiz at telling where things like that belong, Cadwallader."

"Gee, that's swell of you. I . . ."

"And another thing," I went on. "If and when you're found by your folks, you'll never mention me. You'll tell them you don't remember where you've been. Same goes for cops. Okay?"

He wrung my hand so hard I thought I'd lose a finger.

I took all the stuff from the table, except what he'd said was his, out to the kitchen. I put all the currency in my billfold, and put the empties and the junk in the incinerator. I put the jewelry where I usually keep stuff like that.

All in all, it was still nearly a thousand bucks. And he'd collected it in a couple of hours or so, I figured. I began to add figures and count unhatched chickens until I got dizzy.

"Cadwallader," I said, when I

came back to the living room. "I've got an errand downtown. Want to come with me?"

He did. Until almost dark I led him through crowded stores and gave him every chance to acquit himself nobly. And I kept him clear of counters where he might fill valuable space in his pockets with cheap junk.

It was something of a shock when I got in the taxi to take him back home with me, to discover my wallet was gone again. So were my cigarettes, but I had a half dollar loose in a trouser pocket for the cab.

I grinned to myself, Mr. Gupstein, but it was a grin of chagrin. Twice in one day I'd been robbed and hadn't known it.

"Now, Cadwallader, my boy," I said when we were safely in my apartment, "I'll trouble you for my leather back, and if by any chance you collared anything else, give it to me and I'll see that it is all returned where it belongs."

He began to feel in his pockets and an embarrassed look spread over his face. He smiled but it was a sickly-looking smile.

"I'm afraid I haven't got your wallet, Rajah," he said after he'd felt all around. "If you say it's gone, I must have taken it on the way downtown, but I haven't it now."

I remembered all the sugar in that billfold, and, Mr. Gupstein, I must have let out a howl that could have been heard on Staten Island if it had been a clear night. I forgot he was

more than twice my size, and I stepped right up and frisked him and I didn't miss a bet.

Then I did it again. Every pocket was as empty as an alderman's cigar box the day after election. I didn't believe it, but there it was.

I pushed him back into a chair. I thought of getting my roscow but I didn't think I'd need it. I felt mad enough to peel the hide off a tiger barehanded.

"What's the gag?" I demanded. "Talk fast."

He looked like a four-year-old caught with the jam pot. "Sometimes, Rajah, but not often, my kleptomania works sort of backward. I put things from my own pockets in other people's. It's something I've done only a few times, but this must have been one of them. I'm awfully sorry."

I sighed and sat down. I looked at him, and I guess I wasn't mad any longer. It wasn't his fault. He was telling the truth; I could see that with half an eye. And I could see too, that he was just about three times as far off his rocker as I'd given him credit for.

Still and all, Mr. Gupstein, I liked the guy. I began to wonder if I was getting mushy above the eyebrows myself.

Oh well, I thought, I can get the dough back by taking him out a few more times. He'd said his kleptomania didn't go into reverse often. And if I'd start out broke each time, it couldn't do any harm.

So that was that, but after I'd counted all those chickens it was a discouraging evening. You can see that, Mr. Gupstein.

I got out a deck of cards and taught him how to play cribbage and he beat me every game until I began to get bored. I decided to pump him a bit.

"Listen, Cadwallader," I began.

"Cadwallader?" he pops back. "That isn't my name."

It caught me off guard. "Huh?" says I, "You're Cadwallader Van Aylslea!"

"Who is he? I fear there is a mistake of identity."

He was sitting up straight, looking very intently at me, and his right hand had slid between the third and fourth buttons of his shirt. I should have guessed, of course, but I didn't.

But I decided to humor him. "Who are you, then?"

A shrewd look came into his eyes as he swept back from his forehead a lock of hair that wasn't there. "It escapes me for the moment," he temporized. "But no, I shall not lie to you, my friend. I remember, of course, but it is best that I remain incognito."

I began to wonder if I'd bit off more than I could handle. I wondered if he had these spells often, and if so, how I should handle him.

"For all of me," I said a bit disgustedly, "you can remain anything you want. I'm going out for a paper."

It was time for the morning pa-

pers to be out, eleven-thirty, and I wanted to see if any mention was made of a search for a missing nut from the Van Aylslea tree. There wasn't.

I hate to tell you about the next morning, Mr. Gupstein.

When I woke up, there was Cadwallader standing in his undershirt looking out of the window. His right hand was thrust inside his undershirt and he had a carefully coiled spit-curl on his forehead. When he heard me sit up in bed, he turned majestically.

"My good friend," he said, "I have thought it over and I've decided that I may cast aside anonymity and reveal to you in confidence my true identity."

Yeah, Mr. Gupstein, you guessed it. Why do so many nuts think they are Napoleon? Why don't some of them pick on Eddie Cantor or Santa Claus?

I didn't know, and of course it would have been useless to ask him, whether this delusion was something temporary that he'd been through before, or whether it was here to stay, like taxes.

I got dressed quick and, after breakfast, I locked him in to keep him safe from English spies, and I went out and sat in the park to think.

I could, of course, take him out and lose him somewhere and wash my hands of the matter. The cops would pick him up and he'd tell them he'd been staying with the

Rajah of Rangoon, if he told them anything even that lucid. Stuff like that goes over big at headquarters.

But I didn't want to do that, Mr. Gupstein. Funny as it sounds, I liked the guy, and I had a hunch that if he had right treatment he'd get over this stage and go back to good old kleptomania. And he belonged there, Mr. Gupstein. It would be a shame for technique like his to go to waste.

And I remembered, too, that if I could get him back to normal, such as normal was, I could clean up enough in a week or two to retire. As it was, I was out a couple of hundred bucks of my own dough.

Then I had my big idea. You can't argue with a nut. Or maybe *you* can, Mr. Gupstein, because you're a lawyer, but I couldn't. But my idea was this: How could two guys both be Napoleon? If you put two Napoleons in the same cell, wouldn't one of them out-talk the other? And wouldn't the guy who had had the delusion longest be the best talker?

I went around to the bank and drew some dough, and then I hunted up a private sanitarium, and a bit of fast talking got me an audience in private with the head cheese.

"Have you got any Napoleons here?" I asked him.

"Three of them," he admitted, looking me over like he was wondering if I'd dispute their claims to that identity. "Why?"

I leaned forward confidentially. "I have a very dear friend who has the

same delusion. I think if he were shut up with another guy who has prior claim on the same idea, he might be talked out of it. They can't both be Napoleon, you know."

"Such a procedure," he said, "would be against medical ethics. We couldn't possibly —"

I took a roll of bills from my pocket and held them under his nose. "A hundred dollars," I suggested, "for a three-day trial; win, lose or draw."

He looked offended. He opened his mouth to turn me down, but I could see his eyes on the frogskins.

"Plus, of course," I added, "the regular sanitarium fees for the three days. The hundred dollars as an honorarium to you personally for taking an interest in the experiment."

"It couldn't possibly —" he began, and looked at me expectantly to see if I was going to cut in and raise the ante. I stood pat; that was all I wanted to invest. There was silence while I kept holding the bills out toward him.

"— do any harm," he concluded, taking the money. "Can you bring your friend today?"

Cadwallader was under the bed when I got home. He said the spies had been closing in on the apartment. It took a lot of fast talking to get him out. I had to go and buy him a false mustache and colored glasses for a disguise. And I pulled the shades down in the taxi that took us to the sanitarium.

It took all my curiosity-tortured will power could stand, Mr. Gupstein, to wait the full three days, but I did it.

When I was shown into his office, the doctor looked up sadly.

"I fear the experiment was a dismal failure," he admitted. "I warned you. The patient still has paranoia."

"I don't give three shrieks in Hollywood if he still has pyorrhea," I came back. "Does he or does he not still think he's Napoleon?"

"No," he said. "He doesn't. Come on, I'll let you see for yourself."

We went upstairs and the doc waits outside while I went into the room to talk to Cadwallader.

The other Napoleon had already been moved on.

My blue-eyed wonder is lying on a bed with his head in his mitts, but he springs up with delight when he sees me.

"Rajah, old pal," he asked eagerly. "Have you a saucer?"

"A saucer?" I looked at him in bewilderment.

"A saucer."

"What do you want with a saucer?"

The beginning wasn't promising, but I plowed on. There was one thing interested me the most.

"Are you Napoleon Bonaparte?" I asked him.

He looked surprised. "*Me?*"

I was getting fed up. "Yes, you," I told him.

He didn't answer, and I could see that his mind, what there was of it,

wasn't on the conversation. His eyes were roving around the room.

"What are you looking for?" I demanded.

"A saucer."

"A *saucer?*"

"Sure. A saucer."

The conversation was getting out of hand. "What on earth do you want with a saucer?"

"So I can sit down, of course."

"Huh?" I asked, startled.

"Naturally," he replied. "Can't you see I'm a teacup?"

I gulped, and turned sadly to the door. Then for a moment he seemed to gather shreds of his sanity together. "I say, Rajah," he piped up. I turned.

"If I don't see you again, Rajah, I want you to have something to remember me by." He reached for his tie and pulled out the stickpin with the rock the size of a postage stamp. I'd forgotten about it; no kidding. He handed it to me, and I thanked him. And I meant it.

"You'll come again, though?" he asked wistfully.

"Sure I will, Cadwallader." I turned to the door again. Darned if I didn't want to bawl, Mr. Gupstein.

I told the doctor he'd be sent for, and got out of the sanitarium safely. Then I looked the sparkler over carefully again, and I decided it was worth at least five G's. So I'd come out ahead on the deal as soon as I cashed in on it.

First, I was going to appraise the stone, so I trotted into one of the

ritzest shops in town. I knew I'd have to pick an expensive joint to flash a rock that size without arousing too much suspicion.

There was only one clerk and another customer was ahead of me. I looked around, but when I caught part of the conversation, I froze.

"... and since then," the clerk was saying, "you haven't heard a word from or about your brother, Mr. Van Aylslea?"

The customer shook his head. "Not a word. We're keeping it from the press, of course."

I took a close look. The bloke was older and not so heavy, but he resembled my kleptomaniacal teacup.

So, as quietly as though I was walking on eggs, I eased out of the shop. But I waited outside. I figured I might do Cadwallader a final favor. When Van Aylslea came out, I buttonholed him.

"Mr. Van Aylslea," I whispered. "I'm Operative 53. Your brother is at Bide-a-Wee Sanitarium."

His face lighted up, and he shook my hand. "I'll get him right away," he said.

"Better stop for a saucer," I called but I guess he didn't hear me.

I drifted on. If that stone had belonged to the Van Aylsleas and if they traded at that particular shop, they might recognize it, so I figured I'd had a narrow squeak.

It occurred to me that it had been in my tie when I talked to Cadwallader's brother, which had been a foolish chance to take, but I guess

he didn't notice it; too excited.

Well, that takes me up to a few minutes ago, Mr. Gupstein. I decided to skip the appraisal and come right to you for advice.

Are you willing to approach the Van Aylsleas for me and find out if they want to offer a reward for the rock? I understand, Mr. Gupstein, that you *have* handled deals like that very successfully, and I'd rather not risk trying to peddle it.

And the brother looked like a reasonable guy who —

Huh? You say you know the family and that the brother is almost as batty as Cadwallader, and that he's a klepto too, at times?

Nix, Mr. Gupstein, you can't make me believe that he's slicker than his brother with the fingerwork. That's impossible, Mr. Gupstein. Nobody could be smoother.

Oh, well, let's not worry about that. The point is, are you willing to handle the deal for me?

The stickpin? Why, it's here in my tie, of course . . .

Huh?

. . . Well, Mr. Gupstein, I'm sorry I took up your time. But this decides me, Mr. Gupstein. When *two* amateur dips give me a cleaning the same week, I'm through.

I've got a brother-in-law who's a bookie and wants to give me a good, honest job. And I'm taking it. I've lifted my last leather.

You're darned right I mean it. And to prove it, here's *your* billfold back. So long, Mr. Gupstein.

Tricks of the Trade

FIREARMS

BY DAN SONTUP

WHILE many people know that a gun suspected of containing fingerprints shouldn't be picked up and wrapped in a handkerchief, they often make the further mistake of thinking that the gun should be picked up by inserting a pencil in the barrel. This is equally as bad, since some of the powder residue or other important clues may be destroyed.

The gun must be handled with extreme care. It can be picked up by the very end of the butt, or a piece of string can be slipped through the trigger guard and the gun lifted in that manner.

Fingerprints and other clues can also be destroyed if care is not exercised in transporting the suspected gun back to the police lab. Detectives usually tie the gun to a piece of thin wood, which has small holes in it to allow for fastening the gun to the board, and they make sure that nothing can rub against the gun or in any other way damage evidence on the gun.

Once in the lab, the gun and the bullets undergo thorough examination. If a bullet has been recovered at the scene of the crime, then a test

bullet is fired from the gun in order to compare the two and see if the original bullet came from that gun. The bullet for the test is usually fired into cotton in order not to damage it and alter any of the markings. However, if the weapon to be tested is a rifle of large caliber, then the bullet has to be fired into water — as friction from cotton on such a bullet would polish off many identifying marks.

Bullets can often be identified, also, in ways other than the markings made by the gun. For example, particles sticking to a bullet can be used in identification. There's a case on record where a bullet was connected with a crime by proving that it had hit a tooth.

In still another case, a man claimed that he had fired a shot into the earth and that the bullet had ricocheted, thus killing another man. The first man's story was proven true when the bullet was examined and a particle of quartz was found imbedded in it.

Marks of fabric and other material through which the bullet has passed also can aid in identifying the bullet and tying it up with the crime committed.

In cases where the bullet is recov-

cred, but no gun can be found, the police can check the markings on the bullet with those on record at headquarters.

The bullet is rolled on a piece of carbon paper placed over a card, and the barrel markings on the bullet then come out on the card in the form of a single impression of all the marks.

This can then be compared with the records on file to see if the bullet has been fired from a gun that the police have on record in their files already.

It's almost a hopeless case to try and identify a particular bullet through chemical analysis of the bullet itself. However, the weight of the bullet can sometimes be used — and even the weights of parts of the bullet, if the slug has been split after firing. For example, if the various parts of a bullet weigh more than the total weight of a bullet from a suspected gun, then the police will know that the split bullet couldn't have been fired from that gun.

If only the shell is recovered, then identification with a suspected gun can be made — but it's pretty difficult to do this.

The various marks on a shell are usually made by the ejector, the extractor, the firing pin, and the breechblock.

All of these marks are important, but the one that has the most value is the breechblock markings.

The breechblock of a gun is often

finished by hand, and the marks left by the individual tool used on the breechblock are transferred to the shell when the bullet is fired. Thus, these marks provide highly individualistic traces on the shell.

When showing comparisons of bullets and shells, photographic enlargements are often used. However, when identifying shells through the markings on them, the photographs can be printed in the form of negatives.

Then, when two negatives are held up to the light, they can be shifted around until it is seen whether the marks on each shell cover each other exactly.

The smokeless powder used in most modern guns today doesn't leave as many traces as the old black powder used to.

However, these traces, however slight, can be useful in detection in many different ways.

The amount of powder deposited around a bullet hole can be used in determining the distance from which the shot was fired — and this is especially important in cases involving a doubtful suicide.

Powder marks, or the residue of burnt powder, can also be found on the hands of the person who has fired the gun.

However, the often-mentioned "paraffin test" is not very effective — even though it has been admitted in evidence in some cases. The trouble here is that many other substances — fertilizer, tobacco

bleaching agents, firecrackers, matches — can give a positive reaction to the paraffin test. Also, it's quite possible to fire repeated rounds from a gun — and have the paraffin test show negative results therefore making the test inconclusive.

If a wound has been inflicted with a gun using buckshot, then the pattern formed by the shot can be used to determine the distance from which the shot was fired.

Buckshot spreads out in a fairly definite pattern after leaving the barrel of the gun, and this fact can be used when examining the wound under inspection in an effort to find out how far away the victim was

from the gun.

One of the newest methods of figuring the distance from which a bullet was fired is to examine the wound for lead left by the bullet. The amount of lead deposited in the wound will be greater or lesser, depending upon the distance.

Examination of a gun can disclose whether or not that gun has been fired recently, but there's no 100% accuracy in such an examination. Also, there's no way of telling precisely just how much time has elapsed since the gun was fired — but police scientists are now working on this aspect of criminal investigation to make methods more accurate.

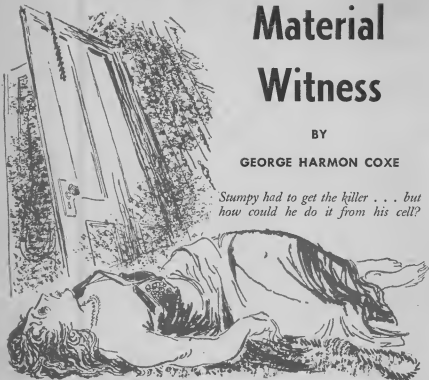


Material Witness

BY

GEORGE HARMON COXE

Stumpy had to get the killer . . . but how could he do it from his cell?



WIXON said, "I'm Ted Wixon, of the *Express*. Mahady sent for me."

The uniformed policeman at the foot of the stairs shrugged thick shoulders. "Go on up."

Steve Mahady, of the Central Bureau, was in the doorway of the second floor room as Wixon came up. Beyond him the medical examiner, two plainclothes men from the pre-

cinct house, and a fingerprint man from Headquarters worked silently, methodically.

Mahady said, "Wait'll I get the M. E.'s okay before you go in." He stepped into the room and spoke a few words to the kneeling figure of a small, mustached man, glanced at Wixon and jerked his head in a signal of admission.

The reporter joined Mahady and looked down at the girl on the floor. She was plump, dark-haired, appar-

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ently in her late twenties. She had been pretty once, but her features, coarsened by dissipation and the heavy application of cosmetics, held a purplish tinge now, and her gray eyes bulged from their sockets.

Mahady said, "Well?"

"Yeah." Wixon lifted his gaze, let his eyes roam about the garishly furnished room. "I know her. Natalie LaSalle. Entertainer at Arnheim's Club Karnac."

Mahady's eyebrows lifted. "Kinda heavy for a dancer."

"She wasn't. She was a blues singer."

Wixon's eyes fastened on the noose of rope, cut short, which lay a few feet to one side of the body. The eyes moved from the noose to a short length of rope with a clean-cut end, extending up over the top of a closet door. He dug long, nervous fingers into his coat pocket, extracted a cigarette, lit it.

Ted Wixon, gossip columnist for the *Express*, was a tall, loose-jointed fellow with a nervous manner and carriage, and as he tipped back his gray felt and turned on Mahady, wisps of reddish hair straggled above his temples.

"I saw Arnheim a couple of hours ago. He told me he'd just fired her. Said she was gettin' soused so regularly he didn't dare keep her on any longer. She couldn't take it, huh?"

Mahady pursed his lips, remained silent. He was a big-bodied, competent-looking man, and his brown suit bulged from necessity through

the chest and shoulders. Yet he moved with a quick grace for all his size, and his blue eyes with their cold, bright cast were never still.

Wixon's voice held an edge as he continued. "You're a lousy dick, getting me down here to identify her. You ought to know her. She was in the car with Big Ed Kelsey when he got his."

Mahady's eyebrows lifted again, dropped back. "I wouldn't know her. I was in Chicago after Boots Scully when that happened."

Wixon grunted, straightened his hat and buttoned his coat. "Well, it's worth a paragraph at that—Discharged Entertainer Hangs Self."

"I think," said Mahady slowly, "she was murdered."

Wixon whistled softly. His eyes were wide as he pointed at the medical examiner and said, "What's he think?"

Mahady shrugged. "He's holding up his report."

Two white-coated men with a stretcher entered the room and removed the body. The examiner closed his bag and stood up. He looked at Mahady. "There's a slight contusion on the head. I'll let you know after the autopsy."

When the examiner left the room Wixon said, "What makes you think it's murder?"

Mahady stepped over to the closet door, swung it open so that Wixon could see the length of rope that had been wound around a stout wire hook. The loose end of the quarter-

inch rope trailed nearly to the floor.

The detective kicked a chair against the door, motioned the reporter to stand on it.

"Take a look at the top of the door, where the rope rested. Don't touch it; just look! See that smooth groove. See those strands of hemp on that splinter?"

Wixon looked at the top of the door, then at the detective. "What about it?"

"If she'd tied the rope to that hook and around her neck, then kicked the chair out from under her, they wouldn't be there. That groove was made by friction. Those bits of rope caught in that sliver of wood because the rope was pulled over the top of the door with her body already on the other end. She was yanked up there by brute strength; then the rope fastened to the hook. Besides, where could she get a length of new rope at three o'clock in the morning?"

Wixon's nervous fingers found another cigarette, lit it. "Who wised you up?"

"We don't know. Somebody called in."

Wixon snorted. "Maybe it was a little birdy."

"No." Mahady ignored the reporter's sarcasm and his forehead wrinkled in a frown. "It was a man. He called about a half hour ago, said there might be some trouble in the LaSalle girl's room. We got here too late to save her."

"And you don't know —"

"We went through the building. Half the apartment's empty. Four married couples, two girls upstairs, the janitor's family. That's all we could find. They don't know anything."

"What're you gonna do now?"

Mahady rubbed his chin with a thick-fingered, hairy hand.

"I don't know."

Wixon snorted, "You're a lousy dick."

Mahady picked up his topcoat from the davenport. "I think I'll go see Joe Arnheim."

The man behind the walnut, flat-topped desk in the office on the mezzanine floor of the Club Karnac was stocky, partly bald. Shoe-button eyes were sunk in a flabby, pinkish face which showed irritation. The man who sat on the end of the desk was slender, with pale eyes, a wide mouth and high cheek-bones. Both men were immaculately dressed in evening clothes, but in Arnheim's lapel was a gardenia, its edges beginning to turn brown.

Mahady looked at the gardenia, then at its wearer. He said, "Hello, Joe," looked at the slender youth, said "Hello, Trig."

Trig Faber nodded. Arnheim said, "Hi, Steve. Hello, Wixon. What's on your mind?"

Mahady sat down on the edge of the desk, picked up a bronze letter opener and turned it over in his hand. "We've just come from Natalie LaSalle's place. She's dead."

"Dead?" Arnheim came to his feet

in a catlike movement. He leaned forward on hands planted flat upon the desk top. "Why — what do you mean?"

"I mean, she's dead." Mahady's voice was flat, his eyelids lowered. "Hanged."

"Hanged?" Arnheim echoed the word hollowly, dropped back into his chair. He was silent a moment. Then his eyes lifted to Mahady. "Christ! I fired her tonight. Fired her because she was drunk. But she's been drunk for weeks; making cracks to the guests. She fell down on the floor last night. I warned her. And tonight she knocked over a table as she was finishing her number. I —"

Arnheim's voice trailed off, then he said absently, "And she went home and hung herself? Hung herself. But am I responsible?" The voice took on an edge. "I gave her every chance. I couldn't keep her here any longer."

"I was wondering —" Mahady's voice was soft — "wondering about the responsibility. We're not sure how she was hanged. Maybe she didn't do it herself."

"You mean —" Arnheim broke off short. His manner seemed incredulous, but there was a visible narrowing of the shoebutton eyes as a wary expression filmed them.

"I mean, I thought maybe you could tell me what you knew about the girl."

"There's not much to tell." Arnheim frowned, rubbed his thick

lower lip. "She was Buck Manzig's woman before he went up the river. Lived alone after that. Been singing here over a year. She was okay until about a month ago when Kelsey was knocked off. I don't know if she was sweet on him or not, but she's been soused ever since."

Mahady shrugged. "That's your story, huh? Well, if we decide it was murder, we'll want to know what you two were doing tonight, you and that other pal of yours, Nick Populanos."

"Why, we were right here, and —"

"Save it!" Mahady stepped to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob. "I said, *if we decide it's murder*. I'll be seein' you." Mahady opened the door, cocked one eyebrow. "Somebody tipped us off, called up and told us there might be trouble in the girl's apartment. Otherwise we might not've found her for days."

Out on the street, Wixon turned on Mahady, his voice disdainful. "What's the idea of the run-around? If it's murder and you think Arnheim's mixed up in it, why didn't you take him and Faber down to Headquarters and give 'em the works?"

"No percentage. If they're in it, they'll have alibis."

"Then what'd you come down here for?"

Mahady walked in silence to the corner, looked for a cab. He said, "You've been around long enough to know how we work. My business

is like yours. How do you get the stuff in your column? Do you dig it up yourself? Like hell. You get your information through friends, acquaintances, informers of one kind or another — publicity hounds who think they're big shots.

"Well, that goes for me, too. Legwork and information. There isn't one murder in ten you can use this storybook stuff on, and you know it. Contacts, information is what solves cases. I've got my channels, informers. You are one of 'em. What the hell'd you think I brought you down here for, because I'm so crazy about your company? This is business with me."

A taxi drew up to the curb, interrupting Wixon's retort.

Mahady pushed the reporter into the back seat and spoke to the driver. "Circle back down the street and park where we can watch this corner." He climbed in beside Wixon and slammed the door.

When the cab stopped a minute or two later, Wixon said, "Playin' hide 'n' seek?"

"Maybe." Mahady fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket, offered one to the reporter, held a light. "There's not much chance of getting anything out of Arnheim or Faber. But I don't think they knew someone had called in and tipped us off about the girl. That's why I put a bee in Joe's ear. There's a chance he might know who the informer'd be. If he does he won't waste time."

"So what?"

"So maybe we'll do a little tailin' — if we're lucky. The Club's on a one-way street. They ought to come out this way."

"And I ride around until morning with you, huh?"

"Why not?" Mahady's voice was laughing. "You might's well be here as sitting around some night club trying to chisel out another paragraph. Stick around. Maybe you'll get a whole column."

Wixon grunted and slouched in the seat.

Mahady said, "Who was this La-Salle dame friendly with? Who might have tipped us off?"

"I don't know any more than Arnheim told you."

"Think!" Mahady's voice was sharp. "Someone must've been interested. How about the waiters? Any of 'em stuck on her?"

"No." Wixon hesitated. "But there was a taxi driver —" He broke off as Mahady jerked erect on the edge of the seat.

A block ahead, a tall slender figure, wrapped in a dark topcoat, came out Prince Street, stepped from the curb, and signalled a cruising taxi.

Wixon said, "Faber."

Mahady leaned forward and spoke to the driver. "Follow that cab. Not too close; but don't lose it."

The cab rolled out from the curb, settled down to an even pace two blocks behind the other taxi. Mahady kept his erect position and

spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Now what about that taxi driver?"

Wixon said, "Stumpy, they call him. He's a heel, but he was sweet on LaSalle. Just a sap. Knew he had no chance — he's a little homely runt — used to run errands for her; thought she was a regular goddess, sorta like hero worship. They used to kid him about it. He didn't care. He was the driver of the cab Kelsey was shot in."

Mahady marshalled his thoughts in single file and let them parade through his brain as the cab rolled uptown. He had not been in town at the time of the Kelsey shooting; but he'd studied the case, knew the details.

Big Ed Kelsey did the slot machine business on the West Side. Joe Arnheim's racket, aside from the Club Karnac, was slot machines. He owned that part of the city not covered by Kelsey. There had never been any open warfare between the two, but it was common knowledge that each coveted the other's territory.

A month previous, Arnheim had given a dinner at his club. Kelsey was there, along with a dozen others including Arnheim's men, Faber and Populanos, a park commissioner, a police court judge. Kelsey had been giving Natalie LaSalle a play. He had left with her at one-thirty. Ten minutes later a frightened taxi driver had burst into the club with the story of Kelsey's murder.

The driver's story corroborated

the girl's. She and Kelsey had stepped into the cab. Before they gave the driver his orders they went into a clinch on the back seat. A minute or so later two shots rang out. Someone had fired two slugs through the back window of the cab. The first shot had missed Kelsey and drilled the windshield; the second had punctured the back of Kelsey's head. The girl fainted as Kelsey collapsed on her lap. The driver, paralyzed by fear, obeyed the command of the killer not to look around. When he finally got up courage enough to get out of the cab, the street was deserted.

Mahady's thoughts were interrupted by the slowing down of the cab. He saw Faber's taxi draw in to the curb at the corner of State Street. A thickset man in a camel's-hair coat jumped for the running board and climbed into the back seat. The taxi swung out to the middle of the street and picked up speed.

Wixon was excited. "Nick Populanos, huh?"

Mahady said, "Yeah." Then to the driver, "Not too close, buddy."

The detective's thoughts returned to Kelsey. When those in the Club Karnac reached the cab in response to the driver's wild tale, they found Kelsey dead, in the arms of the still unconscious girl.

Popular opinion held that Arnheim had arranged the killing. But he was clean, with an airtight alibi for himself and his men. The grilling

of the entire party, the taxi driver, and the girl yielded nothing of importance. The newspapers hinted that Arnheim had imported a killer who had later made a clean getaway.

Mahady looked out the cab window. They were speeding through a sordid, decadent neighborhood where street lights were few and traffic negligible. Three- and four-story, dirty brick apartment houses crowded the sidewalks, their windows staring hollow-eyed at the street. The other taxi was three blocks ahead.

The detective tapped the driver's shoulder. "Drop back another block; we're too close." He turned to Wixon. "So this Stumpy was gone on the girl, eh? Maybe that'll come in handy before we're through. What's his last name?"

"Epstein, I think."

Mahady remained silent as he watched the lead cab turn right three blocks ahead. By the time his taxi had rounded the corner, the other cab was pulling out from the curb, a half block away. Mahady grunted and rapped, "Pull up!"

The cab stopped. Mahady said, "I'll get out here and wait. You ride around till you find a telephone. Call the taxi company. Find out where this Stumpy lives."

Wixon cursed. "Don't I get any sleep at all?"

"You can sleep all day. Quit crabbin' and step on it. I'll be waiting for you halfway down the block. Leave the cab at the corner."

Wixon was back in ten minutes. By that time Mahady had sized up the four-story, drab stone building where a lone light shone from a corner window on the top floor. The reporter was out of breath from hurrying. But this did not entirely explain the excited note in his voice. "He lives on this street," he wheezed. "Number 349."

"And this is it." Mahady stepped from the areaway and started across the pavement with a quick, silent tread. "I thought it might be."

Wixon hurried beside the detective. "Then Epstein tipped 'em off? What are you gonna do?"

Mahady did not bother to answer. He strode up five stone steps, pushed open a frosted glass door. Stale air, cool and musty, rushed out from the blackness beyond. He whipped out his pocket flash, focused the conical rays on the narrow stairs that mounted steeply in the darkness. On the fourth floor he made his way to the door of the room whose lighted window he had watched from the street below. Turning to Wixon, he whispered, "Hold everything!"

Mahady bent down, turned his flashlight on the keyhole and inspected it. He took out a ring of keys, but before he had time to sort them, a high-pitched curse sounded from the other side of the panels. There was a muffled command, then a groan.

Wixon sucked in his breath with a whistling sound. Mahady whipped his service revolver from his holster

and banged on the door. "Open up!"

The groaning in the room continued. Mahady banged on the door again. There was a sound of hurried movement. A window rasped in the casing as it was thrown upward. Mahady swore softly and began to try the keys in the lock. The fourth one clicked back the bolt. He kicked the door in with his foot, whipped up his gun.

The room was in chaos. Chairs had been overturned, the white iron bed had been tipped against the wall. Magazines and newspapers had been swept from a long table and stretched out on the scarred mahogany surface, his feet dangling over the end, was a man.

Mahady, cursing softly, leaped across the room to an open window opposite the door. He stuck out his head, looked across the roof of the adjoining three-story building. There was a six-foot drop to this tarred roof. In the center a tin and glass skylight had been thrust aside from a two-by-four hole.

The detective ducked back into the room and joined Wixon, who stood staring down at the figure on the table. He was a little man, Stumpy Epstein was; little and anemic looking. His face was chalk-colored, streaked with blood from a gash on one cheekbone and a slashed lip. One eye was turning blue and beginning to swell.

Seconds later he moved his arms. His legs twitched and he opened his

eyes, brown eyes that bulged. Mahady helped him to a sitting position, offered him a handkerchief to wipe away the blood from his mouth and face.

Stumpy said, "Much obliged."

Mahady grinned, his manner friendly. "Same to you—for tipping us off about the LaSalle girl. How did you get wise?"

"I got a call to go to 956 West Street about two o'clock. I started off, then remembered the numbers on that street don't go that high. I thought something was fishy and went back to the Karnac."

"Natalie was just getting into another car. I followed it, saw the guys go into her house. I waited a while and when they didn't come out, I thought it wouldn't do any harm to give you a ring." Stumpy managed a weird grin. "She never entertained those guys before. I wasn't sure everything was okay."

Mahady said, "Jealous?"

Stumpy, grinning at his duplicity, said, "What's the matter? Did I give you a bum steer?"

"Then you!" Wixon spoke excitedly, stopped short when he caught Mahady's silencing gesture, the cold, warning gleam in his eyes.

The detective continued, his voice still friendly, persuasive. "You were sorta stuck on her, eh, Stumpy? And jealous."

Stumpy continued to grin. "Yeah." His expression sobered and a pathetic, far-away look filmed his one good eye. His voice softened, his

manner became wistful. "She's wonderful."

Mahady turned on Wixon. His glare stopped the reporter's disdainful smile, then he continued, to Stumpy, "I guess she had a good friend in you."

"I tried to be."

"It's too bad" — Mahady spoke slowly, his head lowered — "you didn't call us a little sooner. We might've been able to save her."

"Save her!" Stumpy slipped from the table, the far-away look in his eyes replaced by stark fear. "What d'ya mean?"

"She was dead when we got there."

Stumpy's mouth gaped. He looked at Wixon, then back at Mahady. He grabbed the detective by the lapels. "No! Don't try to —"

"She was dead." Mahady went on deliberately, "The men you saw take her in her apartment hanged her, faked a suicide."

The detective pried Stumpy's hands from his lapels, pushed the little fellow back into a chair. Stumpy sat there, dumb, his bulging eyes staring, his jaw slack.

Mahady went on slowly with the details.

"Lucky we got here when we did," he finished. "They knew you squealed."

"When they find out for certain we're wise that it's murder, they'll rub you out. Your only chance is to tell who took her home. Who was it?"

Stumpy said, "No!" His hands

flexed spasmodically. He said, "No," again.

Mahady spoke sharply. "It's your only chance. You're the only witness. If you don't come clean, the guys that murdered her'll go free. Trig Faber and Nick Populanos, wasn't it?"

A change came over Stumpy. His thin form stiffened. His receding jaw tightened and his good eye was like brown lacquer. "I'm not sayin'," he lipped.

Mahady fathomed the change. "I get it," he growled. "Gonna be a big shot now, huh? A regular torpedo? Gonna settle it in your own way?" He swore bitterly, stalked across the room and came back to Stumpy. "Forget it! Go gunning for Faber and Populanos, and they'll lay you like a rug. Then we'll never pin it on 'em — or Joe Arnheim."

"Arnheim?" echoed Stumpy dumbly. He stood up, his voice grim. "You won't get anything out of me." He started for the door.

Mahady grabbed him. "You're coming with me."

"Lemme go!" Stumpy made a pathetic, futile effort to wrench free. "I can handle this. You ain't got nothin' on me."

"That's what you think. We'll hold you as a material witness."

The bulldog editions of the afternoon papers broke the story. The medical examiner's verdict was murder. Arnheim, Faber and Populanos, after spending six hours at Headquarters, were released for lack of

evidence. Their alibis, though patently manufactured, were unshakable.

Stumpy Epstein was held in \$500 bail.

At eight-thirty that evening, Mahady was in the drugstore diagonally opposite Police Headquarters. When Wixon arrived in response to a telephone call, he found the big detective leaning across the front showcase, peering out through a flamboyantly trimmed window which offered one razor, one tube of shaving cream and one box of talcum for eighty-nine cents.

Wixon said, "What's up? More hide and seek?"

Mahady remained silent. A cigarette hung from one corner of his mouth, trailing smoke past the corner of a narrowed eye. The detective's clothing was rumpled, his topcoat wrinkled. His broad face was streaked with weariness. Only his cold blue eyes remained alert after thirty-six hours without sleep, and they were still fixed on the entrance, down the street, flanked by two green globes.

Wixon snorted in disgust, stepped down the store and bought a package of cigarettes. Lighting one, he came back and leaned across the front showcase beside the detective.

"You'd better have something," he grumbled. "I've only had four hours' sleep."

Without shifting his gaze Mahady took the cigarette from his mouth, dropped it to the floor and stepped

on it. "Tough," he said coldly. "Only four hours, huh? You used to be a reporter. But they gave you a column to fill. Now you sit in that little office of yours, waitin' for your stooges to call up and give you the dope. Maybe I should've called Murray, of the *News*."

"He wouldn't know what to do with a story if you gave it to him."

"Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Would you know how to handle the Kelsey killing?"

"Kelsey?" Wixon's jaw went slack. "Then this —"

He broke off as a thin, undersized man came out of Police Headquarters, hurried down the steps and began to slink down the street.

Mahady started for the door.

Wixon followed the detective to the street, kept at his side as Mahady moved along in the shadows of the buildings. His voice was excited, incredulous. "You let Stumpy out? Why, it's murder!"

Mahady said, "Don't talk so loud."

Wixon breathed a curse. "What'd you let him go for? They'll rub him out —"

"We couldn't hold him. Somebody bailed him."

"Who?"

"Triangle Bonding."

"Is Arnheim behind it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"But, hell —" Wixon's voice was a hoarse whisper now — "he won't live till morning."

"Probably not."

"But you're pretty sure Arnheim had Faber and Populanos hang the girl. You know they beat up Stumpy."

"Yeah." Mahady's answer was flat, decisive. "But juries are funny. They don't seem to care for what I think; they want proof."

Wixon was silent for a moment, and Mahady continued, "We had Arnheim, Faber and Populanos for six hours today. We got nothing to hold 'em on — had to let 'em go. Stumpy wouldn't talk, wouldn't even admit the beating — so there's no complaint against 'em. He was screwy about that girl, just grinned at us when we pumped him. He thinks he can handle this himself."

Wixon swore again. "He's got no more chance'n a rabbit. He's as good as dead right now."

"That's what I told him." Mahady crossed the street and followed a block behind Stumpy as he turned into Columbus Avenue. "But you can't argue with him. When the guy offered bail, he accepted; wouldn't take a bodyguard."

"Couldn't you sweat something out of him?"

"We don't do much sweating nowadays; not since that guy went to the hospital last year from one of them. The Old Man won't stand for it."

"But if they get Stumpy, you're all washed up."

"Yeah. But I got a few hours and an idea. I was in the Old Man's

office when the guy came to bail him. I propositioned the chief. We accepted bail, but told the fellow we couldn't let Stumpy go until morning. The bailer'll tell his principal. They won't start looking for Epstein before morning."

Wixon said, "Oh."

"Yeah. That'll give us twelve hours." Mahady hunched his topcoat around his neck. "It wasn't regular, but the Old Man decided to take a chance. He knows he's licked any other way."

A block ahead, Stumpy checked his stride in front of a small shop whose one grimy window threw a diffused yellow light on the sidewalk.

Mahady pulled Wixon into a doorway, from which they could watch him. Stumpy entered the shop.

There were three metal balls over the entrance.

Wixon said, "Pawnshop, huh?"

Mahady said, "Here's where he gets a heater."

The reporter whistled softly. "And you're gonna let him loose with a gun?"

Mahady said, "He'll know where to go. I don't."

Wixon began to swear softly. "But it's suicide — or murder."

"It's murder anyway. He's got more chance this way than any other. And maybe he'll give us something to work on."

Fifteen minutes later Stumpy Epstein turned into a darkened street, a decadent aisle of four-story tenements that seemed to shrink back

from the pavement. Mahady stopped on the corner in the doorway of a drugstore. Stumpy turned in the middle of the block and began to climb stone steps leading to a dimly lighted vestibule.

Mahady's manner changed abruptly, as though a charge of electricity galvanized him to action. He grabbed Wixon, spun him about. "Call headquarters! Get a couple cars — the riot squad! We may need gas and machine guns before we're through."

He shoved the reporter through the doorway of the drugstore, pivoted and sprinted down the street.

As he leaped up the steps of the building Stumpy had entered he looked up, saw the lights on the first and third floors.

The door was half open and he pushed into the semi-darkness of a dank, cool hallway. His fingers found his gun as he silently eased the door shut; he transferred it to his coat pocket. From somewhere above came the muffled sound of footsteps on the thinly carpeted stairs.

Mahady moved to the stairway and began to mount on tiptoe, keeping well away from the banister. At the first landing he stopped to listen. The footsteps sounded in the hall above, then began to climb again. Mahady moved silently to the second floor, swung down the hall, hesitated again at the bottom of the next flight of stairs. The muffled tread moved relentlessly on ahead of him.

As he began the last half flight to the third floor, he heard a knock. A voice uttered a half audible sentence. A moment of silence followed, then came the sharp metallic sound of a key releasing a lock.

Mahady whipped the gun from his pocket and took the remaining steps two at a time.

A door was open at the front, left side of the hall. Light from the room bathed a thin, emaciated figure in the doorway, threw a grotesque shadow on the opposite wall. Unmindful of silence, Mahady charged forward. If Stumpy heard he paid no attention. He stood rigidly, half crouching, an automatic in his right hand. He said, "Now we'll settle up," and moved into the room.

Mahady swung through the doorway a second too late. He heard the roar of the gun, saw the slender figure of Trig Faber start to sag as he leaped into the room. Populanos was clawing for his gun. His movement was sure and as quick as a snake striking. His thick lips twisted as he squeezed the trigger. The two shots sounded as one. Only the twin flash from Stumpy's gun identified the second shot.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then Faber, who had kept his feet, folded up and crashed to the floor. Mahady could not see Stumpy's face, but Populanos looked surprised. Slowly the sneer was erased from his lips. His jaw went slack, he tried to swallow. His black eyes shifted from Stumpy to Ma-

hady. The gun slipped from nerveless fingers; his knees buckled. He pitched forward, rolled over, and finally managed to gain a sitting position with his back against the wall.

Stumpy dropped the automatic. Mahady slipped his gun in his pocket, then grabbed the fellow before he could fall. Gently he lowered the thin form to the floor beside the fallen automatic. He opened the vest, pulled up the shirt and undershirt. A small blue hole showed in the dead-white skin just above the belt. There was no blood, just a bluish hole.

Wixon barged through the open doorway and jerked erect in his tracks. He sucked in his breath, exhaled in a funny sigh and said, "So he got 'em?"

Stumpy, stretched out on the floor, opened his eyes and smiled. It was a crazy smile, pathetic in its genuine satisfaction.

"Sure I got 'em," he said thickly.

He turned his head so he could look at Mahady. His face was blanching, its hue not unlike the white strips of adhesive tape which had been slapped across his cheek and over his eye. "It's all right, copper," he said, still smiling. "You did the best you could. It don't hurt. I just feel sorta numb."

Neither Wixon nor Mahady spoke. A silence, grim and forbidding, swept over the room, held its occupants in its momentary grasp. Then Stumpy said, "Oh, I know my num-

ber's up. But it's okay with me. They killed Natalie and —"

"You should've stayed in jail, told us what you knew."

Mahady's voice was gruff.

"Yeah." Stumpy twisted his head. "They'd probably beat the rap anyway. They've done it before. I couldn't take a chance." He licked his lips. "I had to pay off for her."

"But how about Arnheim?" pressed Mahady grimly.

"Oh, I don't mind talking now. I won't be able to get him myself, so I'll have to tell you."

Mahady glanced at Wixon, spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Got a pencil?" He turned back to Stumpy. "Was it you or LaSalle who killed Kelsey?"

Wixon's gasp was a sucking sound. Stumpy's bulging eyes were surprised. "How'd you know?"

"Why else would Arnheim want her out of the way?" Mahady glanced up, saw that Wixon, tight-lipped and grim, was busy with a pencil and a fold of copy paper. "He wanted Kelsey out. You and the girl had the perfect opportunity to kill him, and as long as you stuck to your story it was a cinch. But she's been drunk a lot lately, her tongue was loose; she once said she was tired of protecting a mug. Arnheim knew the answer. He had to get her out. If the suicide idea had worked, he'd been set because you wouldn't be wise."

Stumpy twisted his head. "I killed Kelsey. Arnheim fixed up the gag

for Natalie; she was afraid to refuse. But she was scared. I couldn't let her do it. When they got in the cab, I went around and shot him through the back window. It wasn't her fault. Arnheim made her."

Stumpy was silent a moment, then he said, "I guess you doped it right. I didn't stop to figure *why* they killed her last night. All I wanted was the ones that did it. You'll get Arnheim now, won't you —"

"I'm afraid not."

Mahady jerked erect as the soft voice filled the room, his hand flashing to his pocket.

"Don't touch it! Up with 'em. You too, Wixon!"

Mahady hesitated, then raised his hands as he turned to face Joe Arnheim. Wixon, clutching the pencil and paper, shoved his arms above his head.

Arnheim moved out from the doorway leading to the outer rooms in the apartment, circled the room to the door to the outer hall, and locked it. Lowered lids nearly obscured his shoe-button eyes as he turned to face the detective. The automatic in his fat, manicured hand was steady. The eyes swivelled around the room.

"Looks like you got Faber," he said flatly. "But Populanos is tough." He glanced at the glassy-eyed figure of the sitting Greek, who had thrust one hand under his shirt on the right side of his chest. Arnheim's lips curled as he looked down

at Stumpy. "You've made a lot of trouble, for a heel. Lucky for me I ducked out of the room when you knocked. I was gonna beat it out the back way when the shooting started. But I got curious." He laughed. "A break for me I got in on Stumpy's story, huh?"

Arnheim's gaze fastened on Mahady. His voice became matter of fact, a bit regretful. "You know the answer, Mahady."

"Yeah," The detective stood motionless, his hands raised. His face was somber but otherwise expressionless. His cold blue eyes were steady. Yes, he knew the answer. Even if Arnheim had not spoken he could have read the message in his eyes. There remained only the chance of taking a slug in the hope of getting his gun out and throwing one.

Arnheim said, "Nothing personal, only —" He hesitated, shrugged, and continued. "I don't generally do my own killing." He glanced at Wixon. "It goes for you too, Wixon."

The reporter's lips tightened; the corners of his jaw were white.

Arnheim said, "The cops'll think you surprised my boys, think you all went out in the heat." He looked down at Stumpy. "I'll put a slug in you with pleasure — just to make sure."

Stumpy's bulging eyes seemed to brighten momentarily. His bruised lip twisted in a sneer. "You weren't man enough to give Natalie a chance."

"Not that —!"

Stumpy acted before the epithet left Arnheim's lips. It may have been that which spurred him to move. It may have been his one desire to pay off personally. Whatever the motive, he rolled to one side with a quick, violent twitch of his thin body, grabbed the automatic he had dropped before Mahady reached him, and snatched it from the floor.

Arnheim saw the movement, but his gun was on Mahady. That instant of time helped Stumpy. It was not enough, but it helped.

Arnheim squeezed the trigger as Stumpy whipped up the automatic. The fabric of the wounded man's vest jerked as Arnheim's slug pierced his body. But, in that same instant, he fired, jerked the trigger as his eyes glazed. Then he dropped the gun, rolled over on his back.

Mahady acted as Arnheim turned. He dropped to one knee and his gun was in his hand as he struck the floor. He saw Arnheim's look of surprise as Stumpy's bullet went home. Then Arnheim swung on him. Mahady swayed sideways, firing as he moved. A tiny orange flame leaped at him, and on the wings of the blast a red

slash jumped out on the side of his neck. Then there was a tiny hole in Arnheim's forehead, a hole which widened and grew red.

Mahady got slowly to his feet as Arnheim pitched forward and fell on top of his gun. He took out his handkerchief and began to pat the gash on his neck, still staring at the man at his feet.

From somewhere in the distance came the rising wail of a siren, insistently louder with each second.

Wixon exhaled, wiped the sweat from his forehead with trembling fingers, said, "There's the riot squad."

Mahady put away his gun. "Unlock the door."

Wixon obeyed, looked down at Stumpy, then said, "He may've been a heel, but that last shot of his took the pressure off us."

Mahady turned slowly. "Lay off that 'heel' stuff when you write your story. He did a man-size job and I've got a hunch he enjoyed doing it. Be damn sure you give him credit."

Wixon's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully, "maybe you're not such a lousy dick, at that."



JOHNNY LIDDELL leaned on the bar with the ease born of long experience. He appeared to be listening intently to the little red-head who sat perched on the bar-stool by his side. Actually, he was taking mental inventory of the obvious assets of a blonde who had just wandered into the place, selected a booth near the door and ordered a martini.

She toyed with the martini for a few minutes, made a series of designs of interlocking circles with the wet bottom of the glass, consulted the tiny baguette on her wrist, signalled the waiter and paid for her drink. Then, shrugging into an expensive looking sheared beaver, she slipped a folded bill into the waiter's hand and left, the martini untouched.

Liddell regretfully tore his eyes away from that portion of the door through which her legs had last flashed, stared melancholily at his empty glass. He signalled to the bartender for refill, sighed, and watched with bored eyes as the man behind the stick wiped the bar dry with a damp cloth that left greasy circles,

Keeper of the Killed

A Novellette



The note was from a beautiful girl, so of course Liddell went to meet her. But the girl didn't show up—and two gunmen were there instead.

BY FRANK KANE

then replaced the empty jigger with a full one.

He was dimly aware that the red-head at his side had stopped chattering. He grinned at her annoyance, Copyright, 1948, by Columbia Publications, Inc.

lifted his glass in a toast, tossed it off.

"You weren't even listening, Johnny," the redhead accused.

Liddell dumped a handful of silver on the bar, sighed again. "Honest, Sal," he grinned. "I can't work up any enthusiasm about what Cliff McManus said to the judge after he got sentenced. Why —"

The Silver Peacock's only waiter sidled up beside him, looked around theatrically, then extended a folded note to Johnny Liddell. "The blonde number in the beaver asked me to give it to you as soon as she was out of the joint," he whispered. "She didn't want anybody to see her make contact with you."

Sally nodded. "Can't say I blame her. Open it up Johnny; maybe it's a case."

Johnny separated three quarters from the pile of silver on the bar, pushed it toward the waiter, waited until he had gone. He unfolded the slip of paper. It was scrawled in pencil:

I'm afraid I'm being followed. I've got to see you on a matter of life and death. Will you meet me in an hour on Water Street at the entrance to Pier 16. Please! It was signed *Mavis Winslow*.

Liddell wrinkled his forehead with a scowl. "Mavis Winslow. Do you make her, Sal?"

The redhead nodded. "One of last season's dizzy debts. Cut a pretty wild figure all through the season but I think she's levelled off. Haven't seen her name in a story in months,"

the reporter told him. "Looks like anonymity doesn't agree with her. From the smell of that little billet-doux I'd say our Mavis is front page bait again. How soon do we have to leave?"

Liddell folded the note, dropped it into his jacket pocket. "Not we. Me," he corrected the girl. "If she was throwing a party she'd put RSVP in the corner. This is private."

"That's what you think, darling," Sally smiled sweetly. "If you think I'm going to trust you on a lonely pier with a she-wolf like Mavis Winslow, you've got another think coming."

Liddell nodded. "Always thinking of me, aren't you? Of course the fact that there might be a good story in this for that rag of yours has nothing to do with it?"

"Nothing," the redhead stated flatly. "Well, practically nothing. After all, I've got a job just like you have. And as long as you keep stalling about asking me to marry you, I have to keep that job."

The private detective fumbled through his pockets, came up with a battered paper pack of cigarettes, offered one to the girl. "Well, maybe you'll come in handy at that." He selected a bedraggled cigarette from the pack, hung it from the corner of his mouth. "What kind of trouble is this Mavis gal likely to get into?" he asked.

The redhead accepted a light, drew a deep lungful of smoke, exhaled it ceilingward. "Anything from a traf-

fic violation to mayhem," she grinned. "Although, as I said, for the past few months she's behaving herself like a little lady from Miss Renshaw's School for Gentlewomen should." She isolated a flake of tobacco on the tip of her tongue, picked it off with the nail of her little finger. "Why do you suppose she picked such an isolated spot to meet?"

"Either she's really being followed by somebody," the private detective shrugged, "or she's playing Treasure Hunt and has to bring back a water-front derelict. Anyway, we should know soon enough."

Water Street was enshrouded in an inky blackness that blocked out any familiar landmarks. Johnny Liddell guided his coupe to the foot of Pier 16, cut his motor. A driving rain lashed furiously at the closed windows of the car, sent a stream of water cascading down the windshield. Every few seconds a far-away, chilling moan of boat horn sounded.

"Nice place for a murder," Sally Herley muttered, "or shouldn't I even mention the possibility?" She tried to peer through the streaming windows, gave up the effort. "Why do you suppose she wanted to pick a spot like this for us to wait for her?"

Liddell tilted his hat forward, slid down to a comfortable position behind the wheel. "You can always grab a cab, you know."

"Nothing doing," the reporter retorted. "I'm here and I'm staying." She held her wrist down under the

dash where a few weak beams of the dashboard light brightened the dial of her watch. "It's 11:30 now. She should have been here." She turned, stared out the back window of the coupe. "Johnny! It's a car coming up behind us. Without lights."

The private detective wiggled erect, stared through the window. "She must be —" He broke off, grabbed the reporter roughly by the shoulder. "Down, Sal. Quick."

The black shape of a large sedan pulled alongside the coupe. Five loud roars from a .45 drowned out the sound of its motor, then it picked up speed and roared away.

Sally pulled herself up from the floor of the car. "Johnny! You all right?"

The private detective swore under his breath. "I'm all right. How about you?" Without waiting for an answer, he flipped the key in the ignition, started the motor.

"What are you going to do?" the girl wailed.

"Go after them." He threw the car into gear, released his clutch. The car flopped noisily, swayed drunkenly.

"Not tonight you're not." There was relief in the reporter's voice. "They flattened your tires."

Liddell swore fluently, turned off the motor. "Looks like the kid was right. Somebody is following her. Someone who apparently doesn't want us to take her case."

"Well, if this is the attitude they're going to take, I second the

motion," Sally panted. "They got some mighty convincing arguments there."

"You wouldn't let a punk shot like that scare you, would you, news-hawk?" the private dick grinned.

"No. But maybe with practice he'll improve."

Johnny grunted, wrenched the door of the car open. He pulled his hat lower over his face, turned the collar of his topcoat up.

"Where you going?" Sally Herley wanted to know.

"Cozy as it is, I don't look forward to spending the night here, baby. There must be a phone around here someplace. I'll be right back."

The reporter scurried to open the door on her side. "No you don't, Sherlock. You wait for Baby. You don't think I'm going to stay here with just a few bullet holes for company, do you?"

"It's pouring rain," Liddell protested. "It may be a long way to a phone."

"Look Johnny," the redhead retorted. "If I have something wet running down my face, I'd just as soon it was rain and not blood."

The nearest phone was in a broken down tobacco shop three blocks down Water Street. The proprietor watched disinterestedly as the two bedraggled figures sloshed in. In response to Liddell's query, he indicated a rickety phone booth in the rear of the store.

The girl reporter consulted a telephone book, found the number she

sought. "She used to live at the Hotel Guard on 58th Street. Number's Manhattan 2-7071," she told the private detective.

He fished a coin from his pocket, closed the booth door, dialed the number. A small puddle of water was forming at his feet.

"Hotel Guard, good evening," a metallic voice assured him.

"Not unless you're a duck it isn't," he growled. "Got a Mavis Winslow registered?"

"One moment please," the receiver chirped. There was a muted buzz, then the sound of a receiver being raised.

"Yes?"

"This Mavis Winslow?" he asked.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Johnny Liddell. We had a date. Remember?"

He heard the sharp intake of breath on the other end of the phone. "Johnny Liddell? But you phoned; you said you wouldn't be there."

Liddell swore under his breath. "I didn't call you, sister. But I got your message — and then somebody sent me another message just for good luck."

Mavis Winslow's voice wavered. "Another message. What was it?"

"A car full of bullet holes. Where did you write the note you sent me?"

The metallic voice didn't hesitate. "In the cab on the way to the Silver Peacock. I found out you'd be there and —"

"Nobody saw it until you sent it to me? You're sure?"

"Positive," the receiver asserted. "Nobody could have. Mr. Liddell, does this mean you're going to help me?"

Johnny nodded. "You're damn right. But first I've got a couple of things to do. I'll be at your hotel in the morning. In the meantime, keep your door locked. Let no one in."

"But I didn't want anybody to know —"

"Look, honey," the private detective cut her off. "So far the only one who don't know what this is all about is me. Whoever you're trying to keep things from is miles ahead of you. I'll be there bright and early!" He slammed the receiver back on its cradle.

Things were pretty much the same when Johnny Liddell and Sally Herley re-entered the Silver Peacock. The same crowd was huddled against the bar, a blue grey pall of smoke hung over the place giving it the appearance of opaqueness. The same white-shirted bar-keep assuaged his boredom by polishing the bar with a desultory semi-circular motion. He brightened up at Johnny Liddell's approach.

"Back already, Mr. Liddell?" he asked with what approximated a smile. "The usual?" His hand reached for a brandy bottle on the backbar.

Liddell shook his head. "Not right now, Mike. The waiter, what's his name? He hasn't gone off yet, has he?"

"Tony, you mean? No. He's on until 3." He glanced up at the clock

on the far wall. "It's only 1. He's probably out back chinning with the short order cook. Why? You want something?"

"Yeah. I'll be in the back room. Send him in. And Mike," he dropped a couple of quarters on the bar, "you needn't mention it's me."

The back room was set off to the right of a telephone booth in the rear of the Silver Peacock. Liddell waited for almost five minutes before the door opened. The ever-present smile on the waiter's face froze when he saw the occupant of the room.

"Oh, it's you Mr. Liddell. I — I thought you left. I —"

Liddell got up from his chair, caught the waiter by the lapels of his jacket, threw him roughly into the chair. He slid his hand into his jacket, came out with a .45. The waiter's face turned a murky gray. He made a fair try at a smile, missed it by a mile. He couldn't seem to control the quiver under his left eye.

"Say, what's this?" he quavered.

"This?" Liddell held the muzzle of the gun under his nose. "This is a gun. This end spits lead. This end splits skulls." He stuck his face down within a foot of the waiter's. "But you don't have to find that out first hand if you'll open up."

The waiter wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "I — I guess you're ribbing me. I — I don't know anything. I —"

"Who'd you tell what was in the note you gave me?"

The flutter under the man's eye became pronounced. "Nobody, I — I didn't even know myself. The girl —"

Liddell's open hand described a short arc, resounded with a sharp slap across the waiter's mouth. A red patch dyed out the greyness where the hand had hit. "Who?"

"Honest, Mr. Liddell. I —"

Johnny raised his hand again. The waiter cringed back in his chair, his eyes sick with fear. "No. Don't hit me. I — I'll tell. I don't know the guy's name. He made me tell. He told me he'd break me over his knee if I didn't. I — I"

"Never mind the autobiography. Who was he?"

The waiter shook his head. "I don't know. I never seen him before. He was a big guy. Had a tux on under his topcoat. His nose looked like it'd been broke and reset crooked. He woulda killed me, Mr. Liddell."

Liddell poked the .45 back into its holster, grabbed the waiter by the collar of his jacket, yanked him to his feet. "Look, Tony. You almost put me on a spot to-night. I don't like guys who play that way. If I were you, I wouldn't be around here any more when I come in. And I come in every night."

"But my job," the waiter protested. "I mightn't be able to get another job. It's a good job."

Liddell's hand brushed the lapel nearest to the .45 suggestively. "If it was me, I'd rather have my next contact with the newspapers in the

Help Wanted column than in the obituary column," he grunted.

2.

Mavis Winslow had Suite 23B in the Hotel Guard. The following morning, Johnny Liddell knocked on her door at 9 sharp. The door opened a crack, then, as if satisfied, the occupant closed the door, slid off the chain and swung it wide open.

In daylight the blonde was even more so, Johnny noticed. She wore a slinky light green hostess gown that had never been intended to conceal. Her eyes, which were almost the color of the gown, crinkled up into a welcome smile. She held out her hand.

"I'm so glad you came, Mr. Liddell." She waited until he was in, then re-chained the door. "I have someone here. I hope you don't mind. He's as much concerned about this situation as I am."

She led the way into a large, sunlit living room. A thin man, conservatively dressed, got up from an easy chair as they entered.

"This is Henry Bauer, Bud's guardian," she introduced the two. "This is the detective I was telling you about, Uncle Henry."

The man had cold clammy hands, but his grip was firm when he shook hands with the detective.

"Now I know everything except who is Bud and what's this all about," Johnny reminded them. "So far I've been used as a clay pigeon, spied on by strange men, double-

crossed by my favorite waiter and introduced to people's uncles. What's it all about?"

The blonde dropped into a chair, exposing a generous expanse of knee. She indicated a chair opposite her for the detective. Uncle Henry returned to his own.

"Bud is Harvey Milshire, Jr.," Mavis started to explain. "He's a good kid, a little wild maybe, but a good kid." Henry nodded his solemn agreement. "His big weakness is a yen for gambling. Up until a few months ago, it wasn't bad. He'd lose a few hundred or so and that would be that. But then this Ace Carter opened up that dive of his over in Jersey. Bud lost more than he ever lost before. He tried to win it back." She shrugged. "You can guess what happened."

Liddell fumbled through his pockets for a cigarette, ended up by accepting the cigar Uncle Henry proffered. "I suppose he passed enough paper so that you could redecorate this room with it."

"That's what we don't know," Uncle Henry broke in. "He did give Ace Carter IOU's. For how much we don't know."

Liddell thoughtfully stripped the cellophane jacket from the cigar. "How come?"

"I guess it's my fault," Uncle Henry sighed. "I've tried to tone the boy down. Didn't approve of gambling. You see, until he's 21, he only gets the interest from his father's estate. He has no money of

his own." He bit the end off his own cigar. "Of course, I had no way of knowing what was going to happen."

"What did happen?" Liddell asked patiently.

Mavis Winslow stirred uneasily. "I guess Ace got tired of waiting for his money. He sent a collector after Bud. It — it was pretty terrible."

Johnny lit his cigar, inhaled deeply, let the blue white smoke filter gently through his nostrils. He waited patiently.

The girl looked from the detective to the older man, then back, as though undecided what to say. "This collector caught up with Bud about a week ago. He — he pulled him out of the car and gave him an awful beating. Two nights later Bud disappeared and we haven't heard from him since."

The private detective rolled the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "This collector. What'd he look like?"

The girl shuddered. "I'll never forget. He was big and brutal looking. Had a broken nose, little pig-like eyes and —"

Liddell took the cigar from his mouth, studied the thin grey film of ash on the tip, tapped it gently. "Same guy that followed me last night and changed the ventilation system on my car. Any idea where he hails from?"

Uncle Henry nodded. "Mavis is sure she's seen him at Ace Carter's place over in Jersey." He leaned for-

ward. "Apparently Carter thinks Mavis knows where Bud is hiding out. He's had this gorilla of his trailing her. I'm worried for the boy."

"What do I do in this picture?" Liddell wanted to know.

"Help us find Bud," Mavis told him.

Johnny shook his head. "You can't find him unless he wants you to find him. And he's not going to show until Ace Carter is satisfied. How long before Bud is 21, Mr. Bauer?"

"Well, you see —" the older man started to say. Then, changing his mind, "In less than three months."

"What do you think we should do, Mr. Liddell?" Mavis pleaded.

Johnny shrugged. "See what Carter's beef is: If you can settle that, the kid'll come out of hiding of his own accord. Maybe the tab isn't too stiff." From the look that passed between the two, Liddell knew that he had guessed wrong. "Anyway, you can go down and have a talk with Carter."

"Will you go along, Mr. Liddell?" Uncle Henry asked. "I — I'm not used to handling people like this Carter. I — uh — I'd appreciate your help."

Liddell tapped a quarter inch of grey ash floorward, flipped off the few specks that settled on his trousers. "We'll make it to-night. I'll pick you up and drive you over to Carter's place."

The *Dude Ranch*, Ace Carter's place, was a white frame building

about two miles north of the George Washington Bridge. A long winding gravel path led from the state highway to the entrance. Johnny Liddell turned the rented car over to a uniformed attendant, led the way up the stairs into the Ranch.

Off the main foyer was a brightly lighted barroom. The private detective led the way in, took his place at the bar, ordered a double brandy. Uncle Henry did likewise, looked around the place curiously.

"First time I've ever been in a joint like this," he admitted wistfully. "But isn't this wasting time? We should be seeing Carter. He may have found Bud already, and —"

Liddell grinned. "There's not that much hurry. Any time you come to a sucker trap like this, head for the bar. That's probably the only place in the joint you'll get an even break. They always soften the suckers up with good liquor at low prices. Puts them in a good frame of mind." He picked his drink up from the bar, downed it, took a sip of water. "Where's Ace, bud?" he asked the bartender.

"Usually in the game room, sir. First door off the corridor on your right." The bartender accepted a bill from Liddell, rang it up, then lost all interest in the proceedings.

The game room advertised itself by a low tense murmur of conversation spiked by the rattle of roulette balls. Almost every table was filled, and in the far corner what

looked like a hot crap game was in progress. Liddell shouldered his way through the crowd to a uniformed floor man.

"Which is Ace Carter?" he asked.

The floor man looked him over carefully. "Business or social?"

Johnny produced a card wrote "Concerning Bud Milshire's paper," and handed it to the attendant. He took it without a word, disappeared through a pair of heavy drapes. He was back in a minute with a nod.

"This way, please," he invited courteously.

They followed him through the drapes into a short corridor. At the far end was a door marked private. The guard knocked, then opened the door. As Johnny passed him, the man stumbled, catching at Johnny Liddell for support. He apologized, brushed Liddell's coat of some imaginary wrinkles he had caused.

"Waste of time," Liddell grinned. "I'm not heeled."

The guard nodded, closed the door behind him. Ace Carter sat on the corner of a light oak desk, his feet swinging lightly against the side. He didn't look up from the apparently absorbing task of cleaning his nails with a small pocket knife.

"Wanted to see me?" he asked.

He was smaller than Johnny Liddell had expected him to be, and dapper. His hair, carefully slicked back, was a deep black that seemed almost blue in the indirect lighting of the office.

"Yeah," the private detective told him coolly. "That is, if we're not interrupting something more important."

The gambler looked up, grinned, closed the knife, stowed it in his jacket pocket. "About Bud Milshire, I think you said?"

Liddell nodded. "Understand he owes you some money?"

"Some money?" the gambler sneered. "Who's your friend?"

"His name's Bauer. He's Bud's guardian."

"Oh." Carter jumped nimbly to the floor. "Now we're getting someplace." He walked around to the far side of the desk, selected a small key on his chain, opened the desk drawer. He selected a bunch of slips of paper held together by a rubber band, dropped them on the desk. "There you are. Fifty grand worth of them."

The old man stammered. "F — fifty grand? You mean fifty thousand dollars?" He wiped his brow with his hand. "Certainly I have no intention of paying anything like that."

Carter picked up the bundle of slips. "Neither has he, apparently. But he will. Don't fret about it; he will." He threw the paper back into his drawer, locked it. "He'll pay if I have to take it out of his hide. I'm not running this joint for experience, you know."

Liddell nodded. "But the kid's taken a powder. Nobody knows where he is."

"That's been tried before, too, chum," Carter grated. "But it don't work. I've got a couple of boys who could find a tear in the ocean. They'll find him. They always do."

"Would one of these boys of yours have a busted beak and a nasty disposition?" Johnny wanted to know.

"All of my boys have nasty dispositions, mister. Just don't ruffle them," Carter warned.

Uncle Henry was patently worried. "Suppose you do find Bud before we can contact him, Mr. Carter? What do you intend to do?"

Ace Carter laughed, but it didn't quite make his eyes. They remained cold. "Don't worry about it, mister. If we find him, you'll hear all about it." He pressed a button on the edge of the desk. The door marked private swung open, the uniformed attendant standing there, hand in pocket. "The boys were just leaving, Al. Don't bother having them stop at any of the tables on the way out. They don't like to play for keeps."

The ringing telephone woke Johnny Liddell. He switched on the bed light, noted it was almost 5 a.m. Swearing softly under his breath, he reached for the phone.

"Liddell speaking," he growled.

"This is Henry Bauer, Bud's uncle," the voice on the other end told him. "I've just heard from the kid."

Johnny nodded. "That's fine. Then he's all right."

"That's just it," Uncle Henry

persisted. "He isn't. He thinks Carter's gang knows where he's hiding. He needs help. Badly."

The private detective groaned softly. "Well?"

He could picture the man on the other end fumbling nervously with his tie. "I — I'm not very good at handling these things. Would you go with me? I'll make it worth your while, Mr. Liddell."

"It couldn't wait until morning?" the private detective tried weakly.

"He sounded scared, Mr. Liddell. If — if you can't go, I'll have to take a crack at it alone. But I'd rather —"

"Okay, I'll go. You driving?"

The receiver told him yes.

"Pick me up. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

Uncle Henry's Buick slid to a noiseless stop in the shade of a big elm tree. He cut the motor, pointed to a dark rambling building a hundred feet or so from the road.

"That's the place. The country club office. It's closed at this time of the year," he added.

Liddell nodded. "Looks deserted. Sure he wouldn't take a powder before you got here?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't. He told me he'd wait for us." The old man opened the car door, stepped out. He waited until the private detective joined him, then led the way up an overgrown path to the entrance. "I — I guess we'd better knock," he suggested.

Johnny rapped softly on the door. There was no response. He looked

at the old man, then rapped again. This time loud. Still no answer.

The private detective transferred the .45 from its holster to his hand. "Better stand back," he told the older man. He tried the knob, turned it softly, pushed the door open with his foot. Inside it was pitch dark, no sign of life of any kind. "Any light in here that you know of?"

The old man nodded. "To the left of the door. There should be a switch."

With the .45 held ready, Liddell fumbled around the wall, found the switch, pushed it. The room sprang into light with startling clarity. Bud Milshire lay on the floor on his face, four bullet holes in his back staining his grey jacket. His feet were near the door, his head pointed toward the inner room.

"They got him." The old man swayed. He started to rush toward the dead boy.

"Take it easy. Don't touch anything," Liddell warned.

"Maybe he's not dead, maybe he's still living," the old man bleated. "Maybe we can help him."

Liddell stared at the body. "Not with four holes like that in his back." He led the old man to a chair. "Don't touch a thing until the cops have a chance to look things over. They're awful narrow minded about things like that."

He left the old man sitting in the chair, picked up the phone. In a few minutes he was telling his story to Sergeant Jerry Macy at Homicide.

"Okay, sarge," he nodded into the phone. "I'll keep an eye on things until you get here." He nodded again, then, "By the way, Jerry. If you can give the redhead a break on this I'll appreciate it. Okay, thanks."

3.

Sergeant Macy didn't fit into the usual pattern of flat-footed, beetle-browed homicide cops. Instead, he looked more like a refugee from a varsity football squad. He looked the body over, grunted, led the way into an inner room, closed the door so that his squad could work without interruption. He found a straight backed chair near the wall, sat down.

"You say when you and Mr. Bauer found the body, it was lying on its face like it is now, Johnny?" he asked.

Johnny Liddell nodded. "We didn't touch a thing. Soon as we found him we put in a call for you." He found a green leather overstuffed, dropped into it, hooked his leg over the arm. "What's it look like to you, sarge?"

"Looks like he's dead," Macy grunted. Then, remembering the presence of the other man, he apologized. "I'm sorry if I sound flip about it, Mr. Bauer. What I mean is that the fact that he's dead is the only thing apparent about it."

Uncle Henry nodded. "I understand, sergeant."

"Looks like it was a .32, doesn't it, Jerry?" Liddell asked. "I'd say he

got it at close range from somebody standing right in back of him. Check with you?"

The homicide man nodded. "Check."

Uncle Henry fidgeted nervously. "D — do you think Carter did this, Mr. Liddell?" He rubbed his hand along the side of his chin. "I — I'd hate to think —"

Sergeant Macy sighed. "I thought you were all over that habit of trying to hold out on me, Johnny. Well, let's have it. Where does the Ace fit into this picture?"

Liddell grinned ruefully. "I wasn't holding out; I was going to tell you."

"When? After that little redhead of yours broke it all over the front page of that rag of hers?" His voice took on an edge of sharpness. "All right. Quit stalling. What about Ace?"

"The kid was into Ace for a roll. Gambling. Ace didn't like the idea and had a couple of gorillas out looking for the kid to have a talk with him."

Sergeant Macy looked from Liddell to Uncle Henry. The older man nodded.

"We had a talk with him a couple of hours before I heard from Bud. Mr. Carter said he'd find Bud and — and when he did we'd read about it all over the front pages." He rubbed the back of his hand across his lips. "If I had thought this would happen —"

Macy got out of his chair, brushed an invisible speck of dust from his

arm. "That makes this a different story. Ace Carter, eh?" he murmured softly. "I've been waiting a long time to pin one on that hood. Looks like today's the day."

Liddell pushed his fedora low over his eyes, leaned his back wearily. "I got a hunch about this one, Jerry. I wouldn't bear down too hard on the Ace."

"Sounds like Ace got to you, Johnny," the homicide man growled. "If I didn't know you so well I'd think you were covering up for a killer."

Johnny nodded. "But you do know me well enough. I tell you, Sarge, I got a hunch this isn't a welsh killing."

Macy grinned, finished buttoning his topcoat. "This is one time your hunch doesn't check out, Johnny. Ace Carter threatens to knock off a guy for welshing, a few hours later the guy is knocked off. Add that up and subtract your hunch." He turned to the older man who still stood wringing his hands. "We'll get a pickup order out on Ace right away, Mr. Bauer. We'll check you as soon as we locate him." With a brief nod to Liddell, he crossed the room, re-entered the outer office where his fingerprint men and photographers were finishing up with the remains of Harvey Milshire, Jr.

As soon as the door had closed behind the homicide man, Uncle Henry cleared his throat. "Mr. Liddell were you serious about Bud not being killed by Ace Carter?"

Johnny Liddell sat up, dropped his leg from the arm of the chair, pushed his hat back. "I don't know," he grinned. "But there is something about all this that doesn't ring true. I just can't put my finger on what it is."

"But you have no reason to believe it wasn't Carter?" the older man persisted.

"No," Liddell grunted. "I was just needling Macy, I guess. Well, how about Mavis? Who breaks the news to her?"

The older man shrugged. "I — I'd appreciate it if you'd come along," he said. "I'm afraid it's going to hit her pretty hard."

Mavis Winslow opened the door herself in response to Liddell's knock. Her eyes widened when she recognized her callers. She opened the door without a word, waited until they were in and the door closed behind them.

"Something's happened, hasn't it?" she demanded. "Something's happened to Bud. What is it?"

"Bud's dead," Johnny gave it to her straight. "Somebody got to him to-night, shot him in the back."

The color drained slowly from the girl's face. She swayed slightly, caught hold of the back of a chair.

Liddell pushed a chair out for her while Uncle Henry went scurrying for a glass of brandy. After the girl had a stiff peg, she put her face down into her hands, sobbed softly.

"If I had only known," she cried. "I thought he was safely hidden."

"We all did, Mavis," Uncle Henry made a clumsy attempt at soothing her. "We can't let ourselves go to pieces. I —"

The girl looked up with a brave attempt at a smile. "I'm all right, Uncle Henry. It — well, it's just that it was so sudden. And — and he was such a helpless kid. I —" The tears threatened to stage a comeback, but got no further than the lids of her eyes. "It was Carter?"

Liddell walked to the coffee table where Uncle Henry had left the decanter of brandy, poured himself a short one. "Know of anyone else who'd want to kill Bud?" he asked. He smelled the brandy, tossed it off. It was a sharp contrast to the synthetic stuff he'd had to drink at the Silver Peacock.

"Anyone else?" Mavis pondered the question. "No. Bud was a wild kid, but there wasn't any viciousness in him. I — I don't think he had any enemies. None except Carter, that is."

Liddell nodded, replaced the glass on the coffee table. "This mug, the one who beat Bud up. You're sure he came from Carter?"

Mavis Winslow nodded. "Bud seemed to think so. So do I."

"He was a big guy, you say. Had a broken nose?" The girl nodded. "You didn't have a chance to notice his teeth, did you? Some gold caps in the front, for instance?" Liddell persisted in his questions.

The girl's brow wrinkled in concentration, then suddenly cleared. "Yes I do," she asserted. "I do remember. His front teeth were gold capped. I could see them shining when he grinned at poor Bud. I—I was so upset. I guess I forgot. But I'm sure of it now."

Uncle Henry looked from the girl to Liddell. "Do you know him, Liddell?"

"Yeah. Name's Joe Cole. Used to be a wrestler and fighter. Now he hires his fists out to anybody who can afford to pay for it." Johnny Liddell blew his breath out through pursed lips. "Sounds like Ace Carter, all right."

"Well why are we standing here?" Mavis demanded. "Why aren't we after Carter? He mustn't be allowed to get away with this."

Uncle Henry patted her arm tenderly and didn't seem too unhappy about doing it. "Don't worry about that, Mavis. The police are already on Ace Carter's trail. In the meantime, you'd better just get some rest. You'll probably be needing it."

Liddell picked his hat up from the end of the piano, stuck it on the back of his head. "I'd better be running along," he told the girl. "I've a couple of things I've got to get under way before the cops trample up the trail too much."

His office was located at the corner of Fourth and 43rd. It was a bare room, boasting only of an oversize desk and a battered filing cabinet. Johnny Liddell dropped into the

chair behind the desk, pulled a bottle from the lower drawer, poured a quick drink, then reached for his phone. He made three calls before he located his party, gave instructions, then settled back comfortably to wait.

It was over three hours before he got his call back. The jangling of the phone awakened him from an uncomfortable half-sleep. He pulled the receiver off the hook.

"Hello?" he grunted.

A heavy voice, unrefined by the telephone facilities, growled back. "You Liddell? I hear you want words."

"Oh, hello, Cole," Johnny nodded. "So our mutual friend did contact you. I told him I was going to save you from the electric chair."

"Stop clowning," the receiver ordered. "What's the gag?"

"No gag," Johnny Liddell shrugged. "You heard Bud Milshire's dead, didn't you? Well, you're it—you're the fall guy."

The voice on the other end wasn't too sure of itself. "You're nuts," it roared. "I never killed that kid. I ain't seen him in days."

"Well," Liddell told him, "All I know is that the police have a picture of the killer, and if it's a frame, then you're going to look all set as that picture."

"What's on your mind? You got a proposition?" Cole demanded.

"Yeah," Johnny assented. "Get hold of Ace Carter. You must know

where he's holed out. Bring him here to my office. Corner of 4th and 43rd. That's your only out."

The man on the other end was breathing hard. "If this is a stake-out, Liddell, you won't be walking out of it." He waited for an answer, when none came, "And if I don't come?"

Johnny grinned mirthlessly. "Suit yourself, Cole. You're the guy that's tagged for the fall; not me. I'll be here for the next hour; and I won't be answering the phone. If you want to see me, come on up." He dropped the receiver on the hook.

A few minutes later the phone started to jangle again. Johnny Liddell grinned, took another pull out of the bottle, replaced it in the drawer, leaned back in his chair. After a while the telephone stopped jangling and he was able to sink back into sleep.

He was awakened by a rough hand shaking his shoulder. He grunted, opened his eyes sleepily, looked up into a face distinguished by a badly scrambled nose.

"It's the fairy prince, Sleeping Beauty," the broken nose character growled. "It's time to wake up. Or am I supposed to kiss you — with this?" He held a knotty fist under Liddell's nose.

Johnny pushed the hand away. "Hello, Cole," he muttered. He got out of his chair, walked over to the water tap in the corner of the office. He let the water run for a moment, splashed some of it in his face, dried

with a towel that showed evidence of suffering from tattle-tale grey, and walked back to his visitor. "You took your time getting here."

Joe Cole scowled, baring the grandeur of his gold-capped teeth. "I get word from a stoolie that you're fixing to measure me for a frame, shamus," he explained. "That makes me unhappy. When I'm unhappy somebody suffers. You, for instance."

"Very convincing," Johnny admitted. "In fact, if I didn't know you better, I'd be scared to death." He sat on the edge of the desk, looked the muscle man in the eye. "You're in hot water, Cole, and you know it. Shooting off your mouth about how tough you are isn't going to get you out of it. Just plain shooting off your mouth might help, though."

Cole tried to stare the private detective down, then his eyes dropped. "I know I'm on a spot; but I didn't knock the kid off. That ain't my line. Scaring them to death, yeah. Blasting them there, no!" Suddenly he stabbed Johnny with a beefy forefinger. "And if you think you can make me a fall guy —"

Liddell waved the finger away wearily. "Stop convincing me. Maybe I'm convinced you didn't do the job. But right now you're the best candidate." He stared at the slugger speculatively. Then, finding a cigarette in his jacket pocket, he stuck it in his mouth, lit it. "Yqur only out far's I can see is to start

spilling. About Ace Carter, for instance. It might make things easier on you."

"No dice," the big man growled. "Even if I knew something I wouldn't cross the Ace. Do me some good, heh?" he grunted. "How much good? You know, you don't get time off for good behavior in a shroud!"

"Suit yourself, Cole," Liddell shrugged. "If you're so dead set on being the fall guy, go ahead. See if I care."

Cole showed signs of indecision. His beefy hand plucked at the heavy bristle on his chin. "Nobody'll pin any bum rap on me," he growled.

"Nobody wants to," Johnny insisted. "Just tell me —"

The door slammed open, suddenly. Ace Carter stood in the doorway, an ugly .45 aimed at Johnny Liddell's middle. "He's told you all he's going to tell you, Liddell," the gambler gritted. His eyes swung to the muscle man. "I told you you were wasting your time coming here."

Johnny Liddell exhaled gently through his nostrils. "You oughtn't sneak up on people with a .45, Ace. You might scare somebody." He removed the cigarette from his mouth, tapped it gently. "Guns of that calibre are liable to make people nervous."

Carter grinned mirthlessly. "Get gay, Liddell, and it's liable to make you dead instead of nervous."

Joe Cole showed no disposition to

move. "He says I'm getting measured for the fall, Ace," he growled.

"Don't worry," the man with the .45 grunted. "I won't let any bum shamus pin a rap on one of my boys."

Liddell replaced the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "Prefer to pin the bum rap on them yourself, eh, Ace? Sort of as a trade with the D. A.?" He ignored the murderous gleam in the gambler's eye. "If you got nothing to hide, why should you object to our finding the real killer? If Cole had nothing to do with it, why make him stay under wraps? Maybe you're using him for a red herring, eh, Ace?"

Joe Cole growled ominously. His beefy hands hung awkwardly at his side. He stared at Liddell through pig-like eyes that had receded behind two puffy mounds. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, looked from the private detective to the gambler.

"Maybe we had ought to give up, Ace?" he asked.

The gambler sneered. "Gonna let a two bit shamus sell you down the river, you dope? You'll do what I say. We're getting out of here."

For a big man, Cole moved surprisingly fast. One of his hands deflected the .45. Carter squeezed the trigger, but succeeded only in blowing a hole through the side of the desk where Johnny Liddell sat. Before he could pull the trigger again, Cole's beefy right caught him flush in the mouth. His ripe lips

popped like an over-ripe canteloupe, spilling red down the front of his shirt. He wobbled drunkenly when a second pile driver blow caught him under the eye, slammed him back against the wall. He slid to a sitting position, didn't move.

"Okay, Liddell," the slugger growled. "I'm taking you up on it. Me, I had nothing to do with the kid's killing and I got no hankering to take any rap for it. But if you're crossing me —"

Liddell was already on the phone. He notified Sergeant Macy that both Ace Carter and Joe Cole were his for the asking. He was still sitting on the edge of the desk when Macy's men came rushing in to pick up the two men.

Later that afternoon, Johnny Liddell sat in Sergeant Macy's office at headquarters. He drank listlessly from the paper container of coffee that the sergeant provided. "You look pretty happy, Jerry," he growled.

"Why not?" the sergeant grinned. "We've got Ace Carter and his muscle man in the cooler. Some of the boys are talking it over with them now. Should be a break pretty soon." He shrugged. "It's one or the other."

Liddell finished the coffee, crumpled the cardboard container and tossed it at the wastebasket. "I'm not so sure about that," he grunted. "I got a funny feeling about this one, Jerry. Neither Ace nor Cole taste right to me."

Macy grinned, leaned back in his chair. "Stop trying to poke holes in it, will you, Johnny. It's all wrapped up."

"I don't have to poke holes in it, Jerry," the private detective retorted. "There's already a big one in it. There's some piece in this whole picture that don't fit, and I can't put my finger on it."

"Well, there's the folder on the case. All ready for the D.A. It fits like one of Jane Russell's sweaters." He pushed over the manila folder. "If you can find a flaw in it, help yourself."

Johnny reached over, snagged the folder. He ran through pages of typewritten notes, glanced at the pictures and prints taken by Macy's men at the scene of the crime. Suddenly, he stiffened in his chair. "Wait a minute, Jerry," he started. "I think I got it." He laid a picture of the scene of the crime flat on the desk. "Take a look at that. Notice how the kid's lying — on his face, head away from the door, plugged in the back."

"Is that any great discovery? You were there. That's how it was when you found the kid. Anyway, that's what you said." Macy was wary.

Liddell nodded. "That's how we found him all right, and that's what was bothering me." He drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk for a moment. "I got the picture now, Jerry," he said.

"We've had it ever since we laid our hands on those two hoods,"

Macy countered, but there was an uncertain tone to his voice. "One of them did it. It's just a question of time until they break."

"Call the sitting room," Johnny challenged. "See if they show any signs of breaking. I'll give odds that your boys are the ones that are getting tired."

Sergeant Macy scowled, dialed the number of the detention room on the interoffice communicator, mumbled and muttered into the mouthpiece, then glumly tossed it back on its prongs. He shook his head. "No sign of a break yet. They're old timers at this game, don't forget. They'll break in time."

Liddell shook his head. "That's not the way to break them, Sarge," he said. "That kind of a hood has to get slapped in the face with facts, not some detective's fists."

"What would you suggest?" Macy growled.

"I've got a 14-karat hunch on this one. It'll take me a couple of hours to check my facts." He looked at his watch. "Give me until 9 tonight to get what I'm looking for, then you can turn your whole wrecking crew loose on Cole and the Ace."

Macy ran his stubby fingers through his hair, pondered. "And what kind of evidence will you be running down in the meantime?"

Johnny Liddell shrugged. "I don't know; I'm riding a hunch. But I'd like to have a talk with some of my friends in Wall Street about Uncle Henry and his financial condition."

"And then what happens?"

"Then you hold a little party here tonight at 9. Have Uncle Henry, Joe Cole and Ace and even Mavis down for the final curtain." Johnny Liddell pulled himself up to his feet. "I'll guarantee to wind it up for you then."

Sergeant Jerry Macy stared at the private detective, pondered for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. At 9 tonight. And it better be a rabbit you pull out of that hat of yours, not a lemon!"

4.

Johnny Liddell spent the remainder of the day vacillating between the offices of various investment companies and the City Hall of Records. As 9 o'clock approached, he marshalled his facts at the bar in the Silver Peacock. Sally Herley perched on the edge of the adjoining barstool, taking notes as Johnny unravelled the story for her. Finally, he stood up, looked at the clock over the bar.

"I've got to beat it, babe," he told her. "Now don't cross me. I won't break the news to Macy until 9:15. Make sure that story doesn't get on the street before then," he grinned.

Sally grinned back. "Don't worry, Sherlock. It won't be long after that. We'll have a special on the streets by 9:30." She glanced at the clock. "And that only leaves me 45 minutes." She grabbed her handbag from the bar, ran for the door.

Twenty minutes later, Liddell sauntered into Macy's office at headquarters. As he came in, Macy hung up the phone.

"We were just getting set to call this party off," he growled. "I was calling your office — the Silver Peacock — to see if you'd been dredged up anywhere."

Johnny grinned, nodded to Uncle Henry and Mavis, waved to Joe Cole and Ace Carter who sat at the far side of the room between two burly plainclothesmen. He walked over to Macy's desk, parked one thigh on the corner of it, made himself comfortable.

"Sorry to be late," he apologized. "I got tied up in traffic."

"You mean the bar was that crowded?" Sergeant Macy snorted. "Anyway, this is your party. Start cutting the cake."

Liddell nodded. "Okay, Sarge. Before I go any further I just want to explain to all you people that something came up today on Bud's murder that changes the whole picture."

Carter snorted. "Maybe the picture's changed, but the frame is the same."

One of the plainclothesmen seated beside him tapped Carter none too gently on the shoulder. The gambler flashed him a murderous look, then lapsed into silence.

Uncle Henry stirred uneasily. "I'm not sure I like this," he muttered. "I see no reason why we should have to sit in the same room

with my nephew's murderer." He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "I can hardly keep from jumping at him."

Sergeant Macy took a look at the ageing figure of the man, then grinned. "I'll have to warn you against any violence, Mr. Bauer," he said. "Carter is my prisoner and under my protection."

"Let him come," Joe Cole grunted. "I could use some exercise after being cooped up all day." His bristly black beard looked almost blue under the light coat of powder he'd dabbed on.

"Keep quiet, Joe," Liddell suggested. "You'll have your turn to talk. Incidentally, Jerry, I think you might want a couple more cops in here —"

Sergeant Macy growled. "We've got enough cops now. Quit stalling. If you have some information about the murderer —"

Mavis Winslow jumped to her feet, her face white, her lips a scarlet slash. "This is a farce," she cried. "We all know who killed poor Bud. Ace Carter did. He did."

Carter struggled to get out of his chair; his guard shoved him back with the beefy heel of his hand. "Don't go getting nervous, Ace," he grinned. "I could use a little exercise."

Liddell intervened. "Wait a minute, everybody. Carter didn't kill Bud. Why should he?"

"Bud owed him a roll. You said so yourself. He was trying to renege," Sergeant Macy put in.

"Exactly. Then why should Ace kill him? That was one way of being sure he'd never get it. There's no collection agency been found yet that could collect off a corpse."

This time Ace Carter managed to evade his guard and get to his feet. "The shamus is right. Bumping the kid would be just kissing my dough goodbye. Sure. I'd rough him up and maybe scare him some, but not bump him."

Uncle Henry wasn't convinced. "A vicious killer like you might kill just for revenge, to satisfy a grudge."

Johnny Liddell nodded. "That's very true, Mr. Bauer. But that's not the only fact that points to Carter's innocence. There are several more."

"For instance?" Sergeant Macy wanted to know.

"For instance the gun," Johnny Liddell told him. "Ace would never use a .32. That's no gun for a professional. He'd use a .45 — just like he was carrying when you picked him up in my office."

Ace Carter sat down slowly, his eyes frozen on the private detective.

"Besides," Johnny Liddell continued, "the killer fired four shots into the kid's back. You know yourself, Jerry, that no self respecting gunman would use four shots when he could make one do."

"Why?" Uncle Henry wanted to know.

"Because four shots have four times as much chance of attracting attention as one. There's always a chance, if a single shot is heard, of

its being taken for a car backfiring," Liddell explained. "Ace Carter didn't kill Bud; I've been sure of that ever since I first saw the body."

Mavis Winslow broke in. "Then it's that hired thug of his. That — that man there." She pointed to Joe Cole.

"It wasn't Cole either, Mavis," Liddell shook his head. "I don't say he wouldn't kill if the price was right, but he wouldn't do it this way. He'd use his hands."

"All this is very nice theory, Mr. Liddell," Mavis was indignant. "Bud is dead. That's a fact not a theory; he's dead and someone killed him."

Johnny reached back, captured one of Sergeant Macy's cigars out of the humidor on the desk. Macy was so interested in the turn the meeting had taken that he gave no sign that he'd seen the raid.

"Bud Milshire's dead, all right," Liddell conceded. "But it was Bud himself who gave me the most convincing evidence that neither of these two killed him."

"What?" Uncle Henry was incredulous. "You never talked to Bud. He was missing when we called you into the case and when we got to his hideout, he was already dead. How could he have told you anything?"

Johnny Liddell denuded the cigar of its cellophane jacket, bit the end off, spat it in the general direction of the cuspidor. "That's right. The

only time I ever saw Bud he was dead. But even in death he was able to point the finger at his killer."

"You'll have to prove that one, Johnny," Macy told him.

Liddell nodded. "Bud Milshire was deadly afraid of these two men. Right?"

"That was his reason for going into hiding," Macy conceded. "So?"

"Well, take a look at that picture in your folder. The one of the body as we found it," Johnny Liddell suggested. He waited until the sergeant had the picture spread out on the desk in front of him. "Notice the way the body is lying?"

"Sure. Face down, facing into the room."

Liddell nodded. "Face down, head away from the door. That means that Bud Milshire opened that door, turned his back on whoever it was, then started to lead the way into the inner room. Would he have turned his back on two men he was deathly afraid of?"

Sergeant Macy rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, nodded his admiration. Then, without a word, he signalled the two detectives who had been guarding Ace and Joe Cole to leave their prisoners and take their place by the door.

Ace Carter struggled to his feet, pulled a lighter out of his pocket, held it while Johnny Liddell lighted his cigar. "Nice work, shamus," the gambler told him. "I take back all I was thinking about you."

Sergeant Macy looked at Carter

thoughtfully. "You can go now if you like, Carter," he said.

"Not me, sarge," the gambler grinned. "I'm just beginning to enjoy this—now that I'm a spectator."

Mavis Winslow sounded dazed. "But—but how can it be?"

Uncle Henry mumbled. "You're trying to tell us that the killer was someone Bud knew and trusted. Just because he turned his back on him?"

Johnny drew deeply on the cigar, exhaled a feathery blue tendril of smoke ceilingward. He nodded.

"Where is all this leading, Liddell?" Uncle Henry attempted a show of indignation.

"To the electric chair—for the guilty party," Johnny Liddell told him.

Suddenly, as though a late realization hit her, Mavis Winslow cringed away from Uncle Henry. "That's it. You killed him. You killed your own nephew. You pretended to be a loving uncle, but you killed him." A look of revulsion twisted her features. "You always hated him, didn't you? You kept him penniless, kept his money away from him. You always hated him."

Sergeant Macy stepped in. "Just a minute, Miss Winslow. Are you accusing Mr. Bauer of the murder of his nephew? That's a serious charge, you know."

"I won't stand for this—this farce," Uncle Henry's face was strained, of all color. "I demand the

right to consult my lawyer. I demand some representation here."

"He was Bud's guardian," Mavis Winslow rushed on. "He had charge of all Bud's money. But he only gave him a pittance, a few pennies when —"

"But —" Uncle Henry tried to get a word in.

"Bud would have been of age in a few months," Mavis continued. "Then you'd have to make an accounting of his estate. You didn't want that, did you? You didn't want to answer for his money."

Uncle Henry was almost speechless. "I resent the implication. I tell you —"

Sergeant Macy ran his fingers through his hair, looked at Liddell. "If he dissipated the kid's inheritance, that would make a good motive. Is that what you were out digging up today, Johnny?"

"He did it," Mavis screamed. "He killed Bud. He spent all his money, then murdered him to cover it up. He killed Bud, I tell you."

Johnny Liddell took a fresh grip on the cigar with his teeth. "No, darling. Uncle Henry didn't kill Bud. You did."

Mavis Winslow seemed to shrivel back into her chair. She wet her lips with the pink tip of her tongue, shook her head. "You — you're crazy. He did it. You — you're trying to cover him up."

"Look, Johnny. This is no three ring circus," Sergeant Macy reminded him. "This is a murder in-

vestigation. Why should Mavis Winslow kill Bud Milshire?"

"Because she's married to him; they were married three months ago."

Uncle Henry tried to frame words, finally settled by shaking his head. "No. They couldn't be."

"Sure we're married," Mavis spat out defiantly. "So what?"

"So there's your motive, Jerry." Liddell shrugged. "She became Bud's heir when they were married, and in a few months she gets the estate he would have inherited."

Uncle Henry struggled weakly to his feet. "I've been trying to tell you gentlemen that there is no estate. Bud's father, my brother, left his affairs in a badly tangled way. His debts ate up his estate. The money Bud had been living on was money I advanced him. His only prospect was my estate, the money I'd leave him when I die."

"No estate?" Mavis screamed shrilly. "You're lying. You're trying to rob me. He's lying. Make him tell the truth."

Sergeant Macy looked to Liddell. The private detective nodded. "I had an idea that Uncle Henry might have been using the kid's estate, so I checked. But I found out that Uncle Henry is loaded with money — his own money. He was carrying the kid; the kid's father died practically a bankrupt."

Mavis Winslow began to gasp. The gasps became louder, shriller, finally erupted into a hysterical

laughter. "No estate? No money?" she screamed. "What a joke. What a horrible joke."

Sergeant Macy nodded for the two plainclothesmen to take the girl. She offered no resistance as they helped her to her feet. Her body was still shaking with sobs.

"You killed him for nothing, Mavis," Johnny grunted. He took the cigar from his mouth, eyed it as though it had a bad taste, threw it away. "He trusted you and loved you, and you killed him for nothing."

Mavis looked up. There was a wild gleam in her eyes. "Yes. I killed him. I killed him. I'd do it again. I hated him. I've always hated him. He was mean, vicious — cruel."

Sergeant Macy nodded to the detectives and they led her out of the room. Liddell wiped an invisible film of perspiration from his forehead, got off the desk.

"Well, it wasn't pretty," he grunted, "but that's that."

Ace Carter got out of his chair, walked to the private detective's side. "I guess I owe you a new car, Liddell," he grinned. "Sorry about the pinholes I put in your other one."

I didn't want anybody finding Bud before I did. I thought it would discourage you."

Liddell looked at the gambler thoughtfully. "So it was you, eh?" He swung from the hip, his fist caught the smaller man on the side of the jaw, threw him halfway across the room.

"That makes me feel a little better," he growled.

Joe Cole rushed to the fallen gambler, shook his head until the glassy look disappeared. "Should I take him for you, Ace?" the strong-arm man wanted to know.

Ace Carter managed a sickly grin, felt gingerly of the side of his jaw. "Forget it, Joe. I'm beginning to get used to it, besides, I had it coming. That was only a down payment on the car I owe the shamus." He struggled to his feet, brushed off his clothes, grinned crookedly. "No hard feelings, shamus. I still owe you plenty for cleaning this mess up right. Any time you need help, you know where to come."

After the door had closed on the gambler and his strongarm man, Johnny Liddell grimaced. "That's what I like about this business. You meet so many charming people!"



Motive

A John J. Malone Short Short

BY CRAIG RICE

*She killed her husband because he did a horrible thing.
He sat there and blew smoke rings through his nose.*

"My dear girl," John J. Malone said, very gently, "I am your lawyer. You can confide in me."

The frightened young woman looked at him with her wide, dark-lashed hazel eyes, and shook her head.

"And remember," Malone said, "that Dr. Cramer, here, is your psychiatrist. You've already confided in him — to a certain extent."

She shook her head again. She was a small, lovely young thing, with a heart-shaped face and softly curling light brown hair.

Get that in front of a jury, Malone told himself, *and back it up with a good motive.*

Dr. Cramer patted her gently on the shoulder. He was a tall, handsome, grey-haired man with a reassuring couchside manner.

"Come, my dear," he said. "Tell Mr. Malone just what happened, and how, and why. We're only here to help you."

"After all," Malone added, "we don't want to see you in jail for life. Or," he went on with deliberate brutality, "in the electric chair."

Then he smiled and said, in a different tone, "Don't worry. I've never lost a client yet."

She looked up at him and spoke for the first time. "Yes, Mr. Malone. I shot my husband. I had to."

"You haven't told this to the police, I hope," the little lawyer said anxiously.

"Not to anyone, until now. I shot him with his own gun. I'd stolen it and been practicing with it for weeks, so I'd be sure to hit him."

Malone groaned inwardly. There went the case. "You mean," he said, "it wasn't a momentary impulse? Something that happened — just like that?"

She shook her lovely head. "I planned it for a long time, Mr. Malone. I had to do it, you see?"

"But why?" Malone demanded.

"Because he was driving me crazy," she said simply.

Well, that might do it — with a good jury. "How?" Malone asked.

"He blew smoke rings through his nose," she said, and fainted.

The little lawyer yelled for the jail matron and said to Dr. Cramer,

hoarsely, "Now, I really have heard everything "

An hour later, in the comfortable security of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, Malone said, "We'd better have another. We both need it. And, I could do with some explanations."

The great psychiatrist picked up his drink and sighed. "She came to me some weeks ago, a frightened child. Her only problem was — her husband blew smoke rings through his nose. I tried to humor her."

Malone lit a fresh cigar and said, "Go on."

"I asked her if he blew square smoke rings. She shook her head. I asked her if he blew triangular smoke rings. Again she shook her head."

Malone shuddered.

"There isn't a jury in the world would convict her," he said. "Tell

me the rest of it as it happened."

"I asked her if he blew oblong smoke rings. Again she shook her head and suddenly began to cry. She said, 'Dr. Cramer, he blows just ordinary round smoke rings. But he blows them through his nose.' "

The doctor paused to light a cigarette. "I tried to reassure her. I said, 'My dear child, you have nothing to worry about. In this world there must be hundreds of thousands of men who blow smoke rings through their noses.' "

The little lawyer nodded. "I agree with you." He made a secret resolution to try it sometime himself. "What happened then?"

"She broke down completely," Dr. Cramer said. "She said, 'Yes, I know that. There probably are hundreds of thousands of men who blow smoke rings through their noses. But, you see — *my husband doesn't smoke!*' "



Wolfe had turned the case upside down, and suddenly everybody had a motive. It looked as if there were going to be too many.

BY REX STOUT



PART IV

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

Fer-De-Lance

What Has Gone Before — Fred Durkin, one of Nero Wolfe's legmen, comes to the private detective with an Italian woman Maria Maffei who wants Wolfe to find Carlo Maffei, her brother who has disappeared. Wolfe sends Archie Goodwin to Maffei's Sullivan Street address to question a girl there who overheard a phone call to Maffei on the night he disappeared. Archie takes some items from the missing man's room, then questions the girl and brings her to Wolfe. Under fire, the girl gives Wolfe his first lead: the fact that on the Monday of his disappearance, he had given her a copy of the Times with a large section cut from the first page. Wolfe sends Archie for twenty copies of Monday's Times from which he clips several items from the front page, then flashes

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three separate front pages at the girl. She picks one. Wolfe asks if she'd ever seen a golf club in Maffei's room. The girl appears frightened, says that she hadn't. Archie takes her home. That night he looks over the clipped article. It reads: Peter Oliver Barstow dead from stroke; President of Holland succumbs on links. Early the next morning a Mr. O'Grady of Homicide arrives. Maffei has been found dead. Wolfe gives him everything taken from the room except a clipping from the classified section, advertising for a metal worker expert in both design and mechanism who intends returning to Europe for permanent residence. This ties in with Maffei since the girl had admitted taking boat stickers from Maffei on two separate occasions. Wolfe sends Archie to the office of the D.A. in Westchester to offer a \$10,000 bet to Derwin, the D.A.'s chief assistant that if Barstow's body is disinterred and autopsied, they will find proof of poison. Further, just below the stomach, somewhere between one and three inches in from the skin, will be found a needle, pointing upward. Anderson, the D.A., is the only one with responsibility to exhume the body. Archie goes back to Wolfe, and does a little figuring: X, the murderer, hired Maffei to construct a golf club which, when striking the ball, would release a poisoned needle from its handle. Maffei did the job, probably agreeing to leave for Europe on the next boat. When he saw the Times item on Barstow's death, however, he figured this was a good opportunity for blackmailing X, which was why he was in turn murdered. Archie thinks again of the \$10,000 bet and hopes that Wolfe is right. When Archie awakes the next morning, he finds the Westchester D.A., Anderson, waiting for him. He disturbs Wolfe, who angrily tells Archie he will not see Anderson until eleven. Anderson makes his offer to Archie: a \$500 fee for any information he may have. Archie refuses, and Anderson leaves. Archie picks up Anna Fiore and brings her to Wolfe at eleven for further questioning. During the questioning, she reveals that she received a letter containing \$100, which she could keep providing she never told anyone anything about the dead Maffei or what he did. She burned the letter and is keeping the money. Wolfe allows her to leave — and then promptly goes into a "relapse," wherein: he refuses to think about the case or talk to Archie. It lasts for three days, but Wolfe finally snaps out of it. By this time, Barstow's body has been exhumed, and Wolfe's deductions proved to be correct. Archie shows Wolfe an ad in the paper. It reads: I WILL PAY FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD TO ANY PERSON OR PERSONS WHO WILL FURNISH INFORMATION RESULTING IN THE DISCOVERY AND RIGHTEOUS PUNISHMENT OF THE MURDERER OF MY HUSBAND, PETER OLIVER BARSTOW. It is signed ELLEN BARSTOW. They are considering the ad when Sarah Barstow, the murdered man's daughter, arrives. She asks Wolfe to ignore the ad, and he correctly reasons she is trying to protect someone. He offers a counter-proposition. He will endeavor to solve the murder, claiming the \$50,000 if he succeeds. If, however, evidence points to whomever Miss Barstow is trying to shield, he will withhold this, and settle for a gift instead, which Miss Barstow will volunteer. If she agrees, she is to call Archie that night and arrange for a visit from him the next morning. She calls at six, and Archie goes to the Barstow mansion the next morning. In talking to Sarah Barstow, he learns only small facts about her brother, LAWRENCE BARSTOW, and her somewhat eccentric mother, ELLEN BARSTOW. While talking, her brother flies over in his airplane, waving down to her. Manuel Kimball, one of the men in the fatal golf foursome, is flying with young Barstow. Archie asks Sarah about the golf bag and

clubs, and learns that they've been missing since the murder. She claims they were put in the car by a caddy when Larry and E. D. Kimball, Manuel's father (the fourth man in the golf foursome) brought the stricken Peter Oliver Barstow home. Neither of the men recalls seeing the bag. Archie thinks this is strange, and very convenient. He tells this to Sarah, who becomes miffed, almost refusing to allow him to speak to her mother. When he finally meets the 56-year-old woman, he asks her "Who wanted, or might have wanted, to kill Peter Oliver Barstow? Who had a grievance against him, a new one or maybe a very old one? What enemies did he have? Who hated him?"

Mrs. Barstow answers with one word: "Myself."

Archie is surprised at Mrs. Barstow's response, but he attributes it to her eccentricity. He asks if anyone else had any reason for killing her husband. She says there was no one who didn't love and respect him. Archie leaves her and questions young Lawrence Barstow, who is arrogant, but grudgingly cooperative. He learns that the fatal golf club bag had not been in its locker at the club, but that Barstow had brought it down with him from the University. This changes the picture and does not necessarily cast any guilt on the members of the foursome. Archie then questions Manuel Kimball, the third member of the foursome. His account of the murder differs from young Barstow's only in one detail: he says Peter Oliver Barstow had dropped his driver to the ground after the needle struck him; young Barstow said his father had held to the driver with one hand. Archie leaves Kimball after learning that his father is in Chicago on business, and unavailable for questioning.

When Archie discusses the situation with Nero Wolfe, he is quite pleased. He has discovered that no poison would have retained an efficacy sufficient to kill a man for more than a day or two. This means that the golf bag's itinerary is not bad news at all. The next day, Archie visits the coroner, who tells him that Barstow was definitely poisoned. Archie, remembering Dr. Bradford's immediate diagnosis of coronary thrombosis, asks the coroner for his opinion on this. The coroner refuses to say anything about it. Archie drives to the golf club, and questions the caddies who were caddying for the foursome. One, Mike Allen, gives some helpful information. He tells Archie that all of the clubs in the elder Barstow's bag were new — and that the set was a birthday gift from Barstow's wife!

I GATHERED up the papers and banana skins and went to the clubhouse. There were a good many more people around than when I had arrived in the morning, and finally I had to send an attendant for the chief steward because I couldn't find him. He was busy, but he took time to show me where the library was and tell me to help myself. I looked around the shelves and in a minute

had it spotted, the fat red *Who's Who in America*. I turned to the entry I had already read in Wolfe's office: Barstow, Peter Oliver, author, educator, physicist; b. Chatham, Ill., Apr. 9, 1904 . . .

I put the book back and went out to the lobby, where I had seen some telephone booths, called Sarah Barstow at her home and asked if I could drop in to see her for a minute.

It was only a couple of miles out of my way back to New York, and I thought I might as well clean this detail up. As I was going along the verandah to where I had parked the roadster I met Manuel Kimball. He was with some people, but when he saw me he nodded and I returned it, and I could guess what he was saying to the people with him because after I got past they turned to look at me.

Ten minutes later I was on the Barstow drive.

Small took me to a room in front that I hadn't been in the day before. In a little while Sarah Barstow came in. She looked pale and determined, and I realized that, with my phone call, I must have scared her some more without wanting to. I should have been a little more explanatory; I don't believe in pulling a dog's tail if there's anything else to do.

I got up. She didn't sit down.

"I'll only keep you a minute," I said. "I wouldn't have bothered you, only I ran across something that made me curious. Please tell me, was your father's birthday April ninth?"

She looked as if she were trying to breathe. She nodded.

"Did your mother give him a bag of golf clubs his last birthday?"

"Oh!" she said, and put her hand on the back of a chair.

"Listen, Miss Barstow. Buck up. I think you know Nero Wolfe wouldn't lie to you, and while he's

paying me you can regard me as Nero Wolfe. We might try tricky questions on you, but we wouldn't tell you an honest lie. If you've been nursing the idea that the driver your father killed himself with was in the bag when your mother gave it to him on his birthday, forget it. We have reason to know it couldn't have been. Impossible."

She just looked at me with her lips working but not opening. I don't believe she would have been able to stand without her hand on the chair. She had a good hold on it.

I said, "Maybe I'm telling you something and maybe I'm not. But I've brought this right to you as soon as I found it out, and I'm giving it to you straight. If it's any help to you, you're welcome, and how about making it fifty-fifty? I could use a little help too. Was that what was eating you, that birthday present? Was that the reason for all the fol-de-rol?"

She got her tongue working at last, but all she said was, "I don't believe you would lie to me. It would be too cruel."

"I wouldn't. But even if I would, I know about the birthday present anyhow, so you can answer my simple question without running a temperature. Was that what was eating you?"

"Yes," she said. "That . . . and . . . yes, it was that."

"What else was it?"

"Nothing. My mother . . ."

"Sure." I nodded. "Your mother

got goofy sometimes and got ideas about your father, and she gave him a golf bag on his birthday. What else?"

"Nothing." She took her hand off the chair, but put it back again. "Mr. Goodwin. I think . . . I'll sit down."

I went and took her arm and shoved the chair back a little with my foot, and held onto her until she got seated. She shut her eyes and I stood and waited till she opened them again.

"You're right," she said. "I ought to buck up. I'm no good. It has been a strain. Not only this, a long while. I always thought my mother was a wonderful woman, I still think so, I know she is. But it is so ugly! Dr. Bradford says he believes that now, since father is dead, Mother will be completely cured and will never again have any . . . difficulties. But much as I love my mother, that is too high a price. I think we would be better off without modern psychology, everything it tells us is so ugly. It was at my father's suggestion that I studied it."

"Anyway, this is one thing off your mind."

"Yes. I can't appreciate it yet, but I will. I ought to thank you, Mr. Goodwin; I'm sorry. You say that my mother had nothing . . . that she couldn't . . ."

"I say that the driver that killed your father wasn't anywhere on April ninth. It didn't exist until at least a month later."

"How sure are you?"

"Just damn sure."

"Well. That's a good deal." She tried to smile at me, and I admired her nerve, for it was easy to see that she was so near gone from worry and grief and loss of sleep that you might as well have expected a guffaw from Job. Anyone with an ounce of decency in him would have got up and left her alone with the good news I'd brought her; but business is business, and it wouldn't have been right to pass up the chance that she was unstrung enough to loosen up at a vital point. I said:

"Don't you think you might tell me who took the golf bag from the car and where it is now? Now that we know that the driver is not the one that was in it when your mother gave it to him?"

She said without hesitation, "Small took it from the car."

My heart jumped the way it did when I saw Wolfe's lips push out. She was going to spill it! I went right on without giving her time to consider, "Where did he take it to?"

"Upstairs. To Father's room."

"Who took it away from there?"

"I did. Saturday evening, after Mrs. Anderson came. It was Sunday that the men searched the house for it."

"Where did you put it?"

"I drove to Tarrytown and got on the ferry and dropped it in the middle of the river. I filled it full of stones."

"You're lucky they weren't tail-

ing you. Of course you examined the driver. Did you take it apart?"

"I didn't examine it. I . . . was in a hurry."

"You didn't examine it? You mean you didn't even take it out and look at it?"

"No."

I stared at her. "I've got a better opinion of you. I don't believe you're such an awful fool. You're stringing me."

"No. No, I'm not, Mr. Goodwin."

I still stared. "You mean you actually did all that? Without even looking at the driver? Leave it to a woman! What were your brother and Bradford doing, playing billiards?"

She shook her head. "They had nothing to do with it."

"But Bradford says that your mother will be all right now that your father's dead."

"Well? If that is his opinion . . ."

She stopped; the mention of her mother had been a mistake, it had her down again. After a minute she looked up at me, and for the first time I saw tears in her eyes. Two hung there. "You wanted me to go fifty-fifty, Mr. Goodwin. That's my share."

Something about her, the tears maybe, made her look like nothing but a kid, trying to be brave. I reached down and patted her on the shoulder, and said:

"You're a good sport, Miss Barstow. I'll let you alone."

I got my hat and left.

But, I thought, in the roadster again headed south down the highway. Plenty of BUT. Part of it was that, as much as I respected filial devotion, and as much as I liked Sarah Barstow, it would have been a real satisfaction to put her across my knees and pull up her skirts and give her a swell fanning, for not taking a look at that driver. I had to believe her and I did believe her. She hadn't made that up. Now the driver was gone for good. With a lot of luck and patience it might have been grappled out of the river, but it would have cost more money than Nero Wolfe was apt to let go of. It was just, simply, good-bye driver. As I went through White Plains it was a temptation to leave the Parkway and run over to the District Attorney's office and say to Anderson, "I'll bet you ten dollars that the golf bag containing the driver that killed Barstow is at the bottom of the Hudson River halfway between Tarrytown and Nyack." It wouldn't have been a bad idea at that, for he might have sent a couple of boats out and found it. But as things turned out, it was just as well I didn't.

I had had it in mind to go back to New York by another route, Blueberry Road, and just for curiosity take a look at the spot where Carlo Maffei's body had been found; not that I expected to discover that the murderer had left his scarfpin or automobile license lying around, but just thinking that it never hurts

a spot to look at it. But dropping in on Sarah Barstow had used up some time, and I wanted to make a call in the city. So I took the quickest way in.

On upper Park Avenue I stopped at a drug store and phoned Wolfe. He had called Bradford's office once more, around eleven-thirty, but it had been the same story, too busy to come to the phone. He told me to go to it. I thought to myself; if he's busy now he's going to be positively rushed before we get through with him. It took me less than ten minutes to get to Sixty-ninth Street, and I parked around the corner.

Dr. Nathaniel Bradford certainly had an office. The entrance hall was wide enough to have a row of Brazilian ferns along each side, and the anteroom was big and grand. The lights and rugs and pictures and chairs made it plain, though not noisy, that everything done in that place was on a high level, including making out the patients' bills. But the chairs were all empty. The girl in starched white at a desk over in a corner told me that Dr. Bradford was not in. She seemed surprised that I didn't know that, just as I would know that Central Park begins at Fifty-ninth Street, and asked if I was a former patient. Then she said that the doctor was never in his office in the afternoon before four-thirty, and that he never saw anyone except by appointment. When I said that that was what I wanted to see him for, to make an appoint-

ment, she raised her eyebrows. I went back to the street.

At first I thought I would wait around for him, but it was only a little after three, so I went and sat in the roadster and let my mind out for a stroll to see if it would run across an idea for passing the time. In a few minutes it did, a pretty one. I went to a restaurant on Park Avenue to look at a telephone book, and then went back to the car and stepped on the starter and started along Sixty-ninth Street, and at Fifth Avenue turned downtown. At Forty-first Street I headed east.

As usual every car along the curb was laying its head on the next one's tail, and I had to go nearly to Third Avenue to find a space where I could edge the roadster in. I walked back almost two crosstown blocks, and found that the number I was looking for was one of those office buildings a mile high. The directory said that my meat was on the twentieth floor. The elevator shot me up and I found it on a door down the corridor — *Metropolitan Medical Record*.

It was a young man, not a girl, at the desk in the outside room; that was nice for a change. I said to him:

"I'd like to ask a favor, if you're not too busy. Would you have any record showing the meetings of medical associations and so on held in New York on June fifth?"

He grinned. "The lord knows I'm not busy. Yes, sir, we have. Of course. Just a minute. June fifth?"

He went to a stack of magazines on a shelf and took off the top one. "This is our last issue, it would have it." He began flipping the pages and stopped around the middle and looked at it. I waited. "Nothing on the fifth, I'm afraid. . . . Oh yes, here it is. Most of the big meetings come later. On the fifth the New York Neurological Society was at the Knickerbocker Hotel."

I asked if I could look at it and he handed it to me. I ran through the paragraph. "I see. This is a notice of the meeting. Of course it was printed before the meeting took place. You wouldn't have anything later? A report, a write-up?"

He shook his head. "There'll be one in our next issue I suppose. Was it something particular you wanted? The daily papers may have run it."

"Maybe. I haven't tried them. What I'm looking for is a report of Dr. Bradford's paper. As a matter of fact, all I want is to make sure he was there. You wouldn't know?"

He shook his head. "But if all you want to know is whether he was there or not, why don't you ask him?"

I grinned. "I hate to bother him. But of course it's quite simple; I happened to be in the neighborhood and thought that by dropping in here I could save time."

He said, "Wait a minute," and disappeared through a door to an inner office. He didn't take much more than the minute he mentioned.

When he came back he told me, "Mr. Elliot says that Dr. Bradford was at the meeting and delivered his paper."

Elliot, he said, was the editor of the *Record*. I asked if I could speak to him. The young man disappeared through the door again, and after a moment it opened once more and a big red-faced man in his shirt sleeves came through. One of the brusque breezy kind. "What's all this? What's this about?"

I explained. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and said that he had attended the meeting and that Dr. Bradford had delivered his most interesting paper to applause. He was writing it up for the August *Record*. I questioned him, and he took it very nicely. Yes, he meant Dr. Nathaniel Bradford whose office was on Sixty-ninth Street. He had known him for years. He couldn't say at what hour Bradford had arrived at the hotel, but it had been a dinner meeting and he had seen Bradford at his table as early as seven and on the speaking platform as late as ten-thirty.

I guess I went out without thanking him. Driving back uptown, I was sore as a pup. Of course it was Bradford I was sore at. What the devil did he mean by fooling around at a meeting reading a paper on neurology when I had him all set up in Westchester County sticking a knife into Carlo Maffei?

I suppose it would have taken me about a year to get introduced to

Dr. Nathaniel Bradford if I hadn't been so sore when I got back to his office. There were two patients waiting this time. The doctor was in. I asked the girl at the desk for a piece of paper and sat down and held it on a magazine and wrote on it:

Dr. Bradford: For the last few days I've been sure you were a murderer but now I know you are just an old fool. The same goes for Mrs. Barstow and her son and daughter. It will take me about three minutes to tell you how I know.

ARCHIE GOODWIN
For Nero Wolfe

By the time the two patients had been taken care of some more had come in, and I went over to the girl and told her I was next. She got impatient and began explaining to me what an appointment was. I said:

"It wouldn't break any furniture if you just handed him this note. Honest, I'm in a hurry. Be human. I've got a sister at home. Don't read it yourself because there's a swear-word in it."

She looked disgusted, but she took the note and went away with it through the door where the patients had gone. After a while she came back and stood on the threshold and said my name. I took my hat along with me because there had been time enough to call a cop.

One look at Dr. Bradford was

enough to show me that I had been wasting a lot of pleasant suspicions which might have been avoided if I had happened to catch sight of him somewhere. He was tall and grave and correct, the distinguished old gentleman type, and he had whiskers! There may have been a historical period when it was possible for a guy with whiskers to pull a knife and plunge it into somebody's back, but that was a long time ago. Nowadays it couldn't be done. Bradford's were gray, so was his hair. To tell the truth, as tight as his alibi for June fifth had been made by my trip to Forty-first Street, I had been prepared to try to find a leak in it until I got a look at him.

I went over to where he sat at his desk, and stood there. He just looked at me until the door had closed behind the girl, then he said:

"Your name is Goodwin. Are you a genius too?"

"Yes, sir." I grinned. "I caught it from Nero Wolfe. Sure, I remember he told Miss Barstow he was a genius, and of course she told you. Maybe you thought it was only a joke."

"No. I kept an open mind. But whether you are a genius or merely an impertinent ass, I can't keep my patients waiting for you. What is this note you sent me? Bait? I'll give you three minutes to justify it."

"That's plenty. I'll put it this way: Nero Wolfe discovered certain

facts. From those facts he reached a certain conclusion as to the cause and manner of Barstow's death. When the autopsy verified his conclusion it also verified his facts; that is, it made them an inseparable part of the picture, and whoever killed Barstow has got to fit those facts. Well, the Barstows don't fit, none of them. You don't either. You're a washout."

"Go on."

"Go on?"

"That's a good general statement. Specify."

"Oh no." I shook my head. "That's not the way us geniuses work. You can't shake us empty like a bag of peanuts. For one thing, it would take a lot longer than three minutes. For another, what do you expect for nothing? You've got a nerve. Something happens to get you into such a state that you can't tell coronary thrombosis from an epileptic fit, and to keep you on such an edge for days that you're afraid to go to the telephone, and it's all right for Nero Wolfe to spend his time and money chasing the clouds away for you and turning on the sunshine, but he mustn't make a nuisance of himself. I've got to send you in a trick note just to have the honor of looking at your whiskers. You've got a nerve."

"Dear me." Dr. Bradford was swearing. "Your indignation is eloquent and picturesque, but it demonstrates nothing but indignation." He looked at his watch. "I don't

need to tell you, Mr. Goodwin, that I'm tremendously interested. And while I shall continue to regard the vocation of raking scandal out of graveyards as an especially vile method of making a living, I shall certainly be vastly grateful to you and Nero Wolfe if the general statement you have made can be substantiated. Can you return here at half-past six?"

I shook my head. "I'm just a messenger. Nero Wolfe dines at seven o'clock. He lives on West Thirty-fifth Street. He invites you to dine with him this evening. Will you?"

"No. Certainly not."

"All right. That's all." I was fed up with the old pillar, moss and all, "If you get a rash from your curiosity itching, don't blame us. We don't really need anything you're likely to have, we just like to clean up as we go along. My three minutes are up."

I turned to go. I didn't hurry, but I got to the door with my hand on the knob.

"Mr. Goodwin."

I kept my hand on the knob and looked around at him.

"I accept Mr. Wolfe's invitation. I shall be there at seven."

I said, "Okay, I'll give the girl the address," and went on out.

2.

I've sometimes wondered how many people there were in New York from whom Nero Wolfe could have borrowed money. I suppose

more than a thousand. I made it a severe test to narrow it down. Of course there were more than that who felt grateful to him, and as many more who had reason to hate him, but there's a special kind of attitude a man has to have toward you before you can bump him for a loan and get something more substantial than a frown and a stammer for your trouble; a mixture of trust and goodwill and gratitude, without any feeling of obligation to make it unpleasant. At least a thousand. Not that Wolfe ever took advantage of it. I remember a couple of years ago we were really hard up for cash for a while, and I made a suggestion regarding a multi-millionaire who didn't owe Wolfe much more than his life. Wolfe wouldn't consider it. "No, Archie, nature has arranged that when you overcome a given inertia the resulting momentum is proportionate. If I were to begin borrowing money I would end by devising means of persuading the Secretary of the Treasury to lend me the gold reserve." I told him that as things stood we could use it and more too, but he wasn't listening.

After that Wednesday evening dinner I could have added Dr. Nathaniel Bradford to the thousand. Wolfe got him completely, as he always got everyone when he cared to take the trouble. Between six and seven, before Bradford arrived, I had made a condensed report of the events of the day, and at the dinner

table I had seen at once that Wolfe agreed with me in erasing Bradford right off the slate. He was easy and informal, and to my practiced eye he always kept on a formal basis with a man as long as there was a chance in his mind that the man was headed for the frying-pan at Sing Sing or a cell at Auburn, with Wolfe furnishing the ticket.

At dinner they discussed rock gardens and economics and Tammany Hall. Wolfe drank three bottles of beer and Bradford a bottle of wine; I stuck to milk, but I had had a shot of rye upstairs. I had told Wolfe of Bradford's observation about a vile vocation and threw in my opinion of him. Wolfe had said, "Detach yourself, Archie; personal resentment of a general statement is a barbarous remnant of fetish-superstition." I had said, "That's just another of your flossy remarks that don't mean anything." He had said, "No. I abhor meaningless remarks. If a man constructs a dummy, clothes and paints it in exact outward resemblance to yourself, and proceeds to strike it in the face, does your nose bleed?" I had said, "No, but his will before I get through with him." Wolfe had sighed into my grin, "At least you see that my remark was not meaningless."

In the office after dinner Wolfe said to Bradford that there were things he wanted to ask him but that he would begin by telling him. He gave him the whole story:

Maffei, the clipped newspaper, the question about the golf club that stopped Anna Fiore, the game with Anderson, the letter Anna got with a hundred bucks. He told it straight and complete, and then said, "There, doctor. I asked you for no pledge beforehand, but I now request you to keep everything I have said in confidence. I ask this in my own interest. I wish to earn fifty thousand dollars."

Bradford had got mellow. He was still trying to make Wolfe out, but he was no longer nursing any hurtful notions, and the wine was making him suspect Wolfe of being an old friend. He said, "It's a remarkable story. Remarkable. I shall mention it to no one, of course, and I appreciate your confidence. I can't say that I have digested all the implications, but I can see that your disclosure of the truth regarding Barstow was a necessary part of the effort to find the murderer of the man Maffei. And I can see that you have relieved Sarah and Larry Barstow of an intolerable burden of fear, and myself of a responsibility that was becoming more than I had bargained for. I am grateful, believe me."

Wolfe nodded. "There are subtleties, certainly. Naturally some of them escape you. All that we have actually proven is that of you four — Mrs. Barstow, her son and daughter, and yourself — none of you killed Carlo Maffei, and that the fatal driver was not in the golf

bag on April ninth. It is still possible that any one of you, or all of you in conspiracy, killed Barstow. That theory would only require a colleague to dispose of Maffei."

Bradford, suddenly a little less mellow, stared. But the stare soon disappeared and he was easy again. "Rot. You don't believe that." Then he stared again. "But as a matter of fact, why don't you?"

"We'll come to that. First let me ask, do you think my frankness has earned a similar frankness from you?"

"I do."

"Then tell me, for example, when and how Mrs. Barstow previously made an attempt on her husband's life."

It was funny to watch Bradford. He was startled, then he went stiff and quiet, then he realized he was giving it away and tried to dress up his face in natural astonishment. After all that, he said, "What do you mean? That's ridiculous!"

Wolfe wiggled a finger at him. "Quietly, doctor. I beg you, do not suspect me of low cunning. I am merely seeking facts to fit my conclusions. I see I had better first tell you why I have dismissed from my mind the possibility of your guilt or that of the Barstows. I cannot feel such a guilt. That is all. Of course I can rationalize my feeling, or lack of it. Consider the requirements: a wife or son or daughter who plans the murder of the father with great deliberation,

shrewdness and patience. The lengthy and intricate preparation of the tool. If the wife or daughter, a fellow conspirator who killed Maffei. If the son, the same requirement, since he did not do it himself. Archie Goodwin went there, and he could not spend hours in such a household without smelling the foul odor that it would generate and without bringing the smell to me. You also would have required an accomplice for Maffei. I have spent an evening with you. Though you might murder, you would not murder like that, and you would trust no accomplice whatever. That is the rationalization; it is the feeling that is important."

"Then why ——"

"No, let me. You, a qualified and competent observer, certified a heart attack when the contrary evidence must have been unmistakable. That is adventurous conduct for a reputable physician. Of course you were shielding someone. The statement of Miss Barstow indicated whom. On finding Barstow dead you must have immediately conjectured that his wife had killed him, and you would not reach so shocking a conclusion without good reason, surely not merely because Mrs. Barstow had in her neurotic moments wished her husband dead. If that constituted murder, what kitchen in this country could shut its door to the hangman? You had better reason, knowledge either of her preparations for this crime or of a previous at-

tempt on her husband's life. Since our facts make the former untenable, I assume the latter, and I ask you simply, when and how did she make the attempt? I ask you only to complete the record, so that we may consign these aspects of the case to the obscurity of history."

Bradford was considering. His mellowness was gone and he was leaning forward in his chair as he followed Wolfe's exposition. He said, "Have you sent someone to the university?"

"No."

"They know about it there. You really guessed it then. Last November Mrs. Barstow shot a revolver at her husband. The bullet went wide. Afterwards she had a breakdown."

Wolfe nodded. "In a fit, of course. — Oh, don't object to the word; whatever you may call it, was it not a fit? But I am still surprised, doctor. From a temporary fit of murderous violence, is it permissible to infer a long-premeditated diabolical plot?"

"I made no such inference." Bradford was exasperated. "Good God, there I was with my best and oldest friend lying dead before me, obviously poisoned. How did I know with what he was poisoned, or when or how? I did know what Ellen — Mrs. Barstow — had said only the evening before. I went by my feelings too, as you say you do, only mine were wrong. I got him safely and quietly buried, and I had no regrets. Then when the autopsy

came with its amazing results I was too bewildered, and too far in, to act with any intelligence. When Mrs. Barstow proposed to offer the reward I opposed it, unsuccessfully. In a word, I was in a funk."

I hadn't noticed Wolfe pushing the button, but as Bradford finished Fritz was on the threshold. "Some port for Dr. Bradford. A bottle of the Remmers for me. Archie?"

"Nothing, thanks."

Bradford said, "I'm afraid none for me, I should be going. It's nearly eleven and I'm driving to the country."

"But, doctor," Wolfe protested, "you haven't told me the one thing I want to know. Another fifteen minutes? So far you have merely verified a few unimportant little surmises. Don't you see how shrewdly I have labored to gain your confidence and esteem? To this end only, that I might ask you, and expect a full and candid reply: who killed your friend Barstow?"

Bradford stared, unbelievably.

"I'm not drunk, merely dramatic," Wolfe went on. "I am a born actor, I suppose; anyway, I think a good question deserves a good setting. My question is a good one. You see, doctor, you will have to shake the dust from your mind before you can answer me adequately — the dust remaining from your hasty and unkind inference regarding your friend Mrs. Barstow. From that and your funk. Understand that it really is true, despite

the anxieties you have harbored for many months, that Mrs. Barstow did not kill her husband. Then who did? Who, with the patience of a devil and the humor of a fiend, prepared that lethal toy for his hand? I believe you were Barstow's oldest and closest friend?"

Bradford nodded. "Pete Barstow and I were boys together."

"A mutual confidence was sustained? Though superficial interests separated you intermittently, you presented a common front to life?"

"You put it well." Bradford was moved; it showed in his voice. "A confidence undisturbed for fifty years."

"Good. Then who killed him? I'm really expecting something from you, doctor. What had he ever said or done that caused someone to wish so persistently and implacably that he should die? You may never have heard the story whole, but surely you must have caught a chapter of it, a paragraph, a sentence. Let the past whisper to you; it may be the distant past. And you must *discard* reluctance; I am not asking you for an indictment; the danger here is not that the innocent will be harassed but that the guilty will go free."

Fritz had brought the beer and the port, and the doctor was leaning back in his chair again, glass in hand, with his eyes on the red rich juice. He jerked his head up and nodded at Wolfe and then resumed his contemplation. Wolfe poured

himself some beer, waited for the foam to subside, and gulped it down. He always thought he had a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his coat but rarely did, so I went to a drawer where I kept a stack for him and got one and handed it to him.

"I'm not listening to whispers from the past," Bradford finally said. "I'm being astonished, and impressed, that there are none, of the kind you mean. Also I'm seeing another reason why I so readily concluded that Mrs. Barstow . . . was responsible. Or rather, irresponsible. It was because I knew, or felt, unconsciously, that no one else could have done it. I see now more clearly than I ever did what an extraordinary person Pete Barstow was. As a boy he was scrappy, as a man he fought for every right he believed in, but I'll swear there wasn't a man or woman alive who could have wished him serious harm. Not one."

"Except his wife."

"Not even she. She shot at him from ten feet and missed him."

"Well." Wolfe sighed, and gulped another glass of beer. "I'm afraid I have nothing to thank you for, doctor."

"I'm afraid not. Believe me, Mr. Wolfe, I'd help you if I could. It is curious, what is happening inside of me at this moment; I would never have suspected it. Now that I know Ellen is out of it, I am not sure I disapprove of the reward she of-

fered. I might even increase it. Am I vindictive, too, then? For Pete, maybe; I think he might have been for me.

It was altogether a bum evening, as far as I was concerned. For the last ten minutes I was half asleep and didn't hear much. It was beginning to look to me as if Wolfe was going to have to develop a feeling for a new kind of phenomenon: murder by cenny-meeny-miny-mo. That was the only way that needle could have got into Barstow, since everybody was agreed that no one had wanted it there.

It was a bum evening, but I got a grin out of it at the end. Bradford had got up to go, and walked towards Wolfe's chair to tell him good night. I saw him hesitating. He said, "There's a little thing on my mind, Mr. Wolfe. I . . . I owe you an apology. In my office this afternoon I made a remark to your man, a quite unnecessary remark, something about raking scandal out of graveyards . . ."

"But I don't understand. Apology?" Wolfe's quiet bewilderment was grand. "What had your remark to do with me?"

Of course Bradford's only out was the door.

After seeing the distinguished old gentleman to the entrance and sliding the night bolt in, I went to the kitchen for a glass of milk on my way back to the office. Fritz was there, and I told him he had wasted enough good port for one evening,

he might as well shut up shop. In the office, Wolfe was leaning back in his chair with his eyes shut. I sat down and sipped away at the milk. When it was all gone I was pretty well bored and began talking just for practice.

"It's like this, ladies and gentlemen. The problem is to discover what the devil good it does you to use up a million dollars' worth of genius feeling the phenomenon of a poison needle in a man's belly if it turns out that nobody put it there. Put it this way: if a thing gets where no one wants it, what happened? Or this way: since the golf bag was in the Barstow home for the twenty-four hours preceding the killing, how about finding out if one of the servants has got funnier ideas even than Mrs. Barstow? Of course, according to Sarah's information there's no chance of it, and another objection is that it doesn't appeal to me. Lord, how I hate tackling a bunch of servants. So I guess I'll drop in on the Barstows in the morning and go to it. It looks like it's either that or quit and kiss the fifty grand good-bye. This case is a lulu all right. We're right where we started. I wouldn't mind so much if there was anyone to help me out on it, if only I didn't have to do all the thinking and planning for myself, in addition to running around day after day and getting nowhere . . ."

"Continue, Archie." But Wolfe didn't open his eyes.

"I can't, I'm too disgusted. Do you know something? We're licked. This poison needle person is a better man than we are. Oh, we'll go on for a few days fooling around with servants and trying to find out who put the ad in the paper for the metal-worker and so on, but we're licked as sure as you're full of beer."

His eyes opened. "I'm going to cut down to five quarts a day. Twelve bottles. A bottle doesn't hold a pint. I am now going to bed." He began the accustomed preparations for rising from his chair. He got up. "By the way, Archie, could you get out fairly early in the morning? You might reach the Green Meadow Club before the caddies depart with their babies. That is the only slang epithet you have brought me recently which seems to me entirely apt. Perhaps you could also kidnap the two who are attending school. It would be convenient if all four of them were here at eleven. Tell Fritz there will be guests at lunch. What do boys of that age eat?"

"They eat everything."

"Tell Fritz to have that."

As soon as I had made sure that he could still get into the elevator, I went on upstairs, set my alarm for six o'clock and hit the hay.

3.

In the morning, rolling north along the Parkway again, I wasn't singing at the sunshine. I was always glad to be doing something, but I

wasn't so liable to burst with joy when I suspected that my activity was going to turn out to be nothing but discarding from a bum hand. I didn't need anybody to tell me that Nero Wolfe was a wonder, but I knew this gathering in the caddies was just a wild stab, and I wasn't hopeful. As a matter of fact, it seemed to me more likely than ever that we were licked, because if this was the best Wolfe could do . . .

It was a motor cop. With the northbound half of the Parkway empty at that hour of the morning I had been going something above fifty without noticing, and this bicycle Cossack waved me over. I pulled alongside the curb and stopped. He asked for my license and I handed it to him, and he got out his book of tickets.

I said, "Sure, I was going too fast. It may not interest you, I don't know, but I'm headed for Anderson's office in White Plains—the District Attorney—with some dope on the Barstow case. He's in a hurry for it."

The cop just had his pencil ready. "Got a badge?"

I handed him one of my cards. "I'm private. It was my boss, Nero Wolfe, that started the party."

He handed the card and the license back. "All right, but don't start jumping over fences."

I felt better after that. Maybe luck was headed our way after all.

I got the two caddies at the club without any trouble, but it took

over an hour to round up the other two. They went to different schools, and while one of them didn't need any persuading to go for a ride to New York, the other one must have been trying to qualify for teacher's pet or a Rhodes scholarship. At first I kidded him, and when that didn't work I switched to the ends of justice and the duties of a good citizen. That got him, and the woman in charge of the school too. I suspected I wouldn't care an awful lot for his companionship, so I put him and another one in the rumble seat, and with the other two in with me I found the trail back to the Parkway and turned south. I kept the speedometer down to forty thenceforth, knowing I couldn't expect Anderson to do me nothing but favors.

We arrived at a quarter to eleven, and I took the boys to the kitchen and fed them sandwiches, for the lunch hour was one. I wanted to take them up and show them the orchids, thinking it wouldn't hurt them any to get impressed, but there wasn't time. I got their names and addresses down. One of them, the pale skinny kid who had caddied for Manuel Kimball, had a dirty face, and I took him to the bathroom for a wash. By the time Wolfe appeared I was beginning to feel like a boy scout leader.

I had them arranged on chairs in a row for him. He came in with a bunch of *Cymbidiums* in his hand which he put into a vase on his desk, then he got into his chair and flipped

the mail. He had told the boys good morning as he entered; now he turned and settled himself comfortably and looked them over one by one. They were embarrassed and shifted around.

"Excuse me, Archie. Bad staging." He turned to the boy at the end, one with red hair and blue eyes. "Your name, sir?"

"William A. Riley."

"Thank you. If you will move your chair over there, near the wall . . . much better. — And your name?" When he had got all their names and scattered them around he said, "Which one of you expressed doubt that Peter Oliver Barstow was killed by a needle shot from the handle of a golf driver? — Come, I'm only trying to get acquainted; which one?"

Chunky Mike spoke up. "That was me."

"Ah. Michael Allen. Michael, you are young. You have learned to accept the commonplace; you must yet learn not to exclude the bizarre. — Now, boys, I'm going to tell you a story. Please listen, because I want you to understand it. This happens to be a true story. There was a meeting in a public hall of a hundred psychologists. A psychologist is — by courtesy — a man trained to observe. It had been arranged, without their knowledge, that a man should run into the hall and down the aisle, followed by another man waving a pistol. A third man ran in by another door. The second man shot at the

first man. The third man knocked the second man down and took the pistol from him. They all ran out by different doors. One of the psychologists then arose and stilled the clamor, and announced that the events had been prearranged, and asked each of his colleagues to write down immediately a complete detailed report of the whole affair. They did so, and the reports were examined and compared. Not one was entirely correct. No two agreed throughout. One even had the third man shooting at the first man."

Wolfe stopped and looked around at them. "That's all. I'm not a good story-teller, but you may have caught the point. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

They nodded.

"You do. Then I shall not insult your intelligence with an exposition. Let us go on to our own story. We shall sit here and discuss the death of Peter Oliver Barstow, more particularly the events on the first tee which led up to it. At one o'clock we shall have lunch; then we shall return here and resume. We shall discuss all afternoon, many hours. You will get tired, but not hungry. If you get sleepy you may take a nap. I state the program thus in full so that you may know how elaborate and difficult an undertaking confronts us. Mr. Goodwin has heard two of your stereotypes; I fancy the other two are practically identical. A stereotype is something fixed, something that harbors no intention

of changing. I don't expect you boys to change your stories of what happened on that first tee; what I ask is that you forget all your arguments and discussions, all your recitals to families and friends, all the pictures that words have printed on your brains, and return to the scene itself. That is vitally important. I would have left my house and journeyed to the scene myself to be with you there, but for the fact that interruptions would have ruined our efforts. By our imaginations we must transfer the scene here. Here we are, boys, at the first tee.

"Here we are. It is Sunday afternoon. Larry Barstow has engaged two of you; two of you are with the Kimballs, carrying their bags. You are on familiar ground, as familiar to you as the rooms of your own homes. You are occupied with activities so accustomed as to have become almost automatic. The straps of the bags are on your shoulders. You, Michael Allen, when you see Mr. Barstow, your last season's baby, at a distance from the tee practicing with a mashie, you know what to do; you join him, pick up his bag, hand him a club perhaps —"

Mike was shaking his head.

"No? What do you do?"

"I begin chasing balls."

"Ah. The balls he was hitting with the mashie."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. What were you doing, William Riley, while Michael was chasing balls?"

"I was chewing gum."

"Exclusively? I mean, was that the utmost of your efforts?"

"Well, I was standing holding old Kimball's bag."

Listening to him start, I was thinking that Wolfe's long words would get the kids so tied up that pretty soon they would just go dead on him, but it worked the other way. Without telling them so he had given them the feeling that he was counting on them to help him show how dumb the hundred psychologists had been, and they weren't going to get licked at it because it took long words to do it.

He went along inch by inch, now with this boy, now with that, sometimes with all of them talking at once. He let them get into a long discussion of the relative merits of various brands of clubs, and sat with his eyes half closed pretending he enjoyed it. He questioned them for half an hour regarding the identities and characteristics of the other caddies and golfers present, those belonging to the matches which immediately preceded the Barstow foursome at the tee. Every time one of the boys bolted ahead to the actual teeing off Wolfe called him back. Among all the irrelevancies I could see one thing, perhaps the main thing, he was doing: he wasn't losing sight for a single instant of each and every club in each and every bag.

For lunch Fritz gave us two enormous chicken pies and four water-

melons. I did the serving, as usual when there was company, and by speeding up with my knife and fork I barely managed to get my own meal in by the time the casseroles were empty. The watermelons were simple; I gave a half to each of the boys and the same for Wolfe and myself, and that left one for Fritz. I suspected he wouldn't touch it, but thought there might be use for it later on.

After lunch, we resumed where we had left off. It was wonderful the way Wolfe had long since opened those boys' minds up and let the air in. They went right ahead. They had forgotten entirely that someone was trying to get something out of them or that they were supposed to be using their memories; they were just like a bunch of kids talking over the ball game they had played the day before, only Wolfe was on top of them every minute not letting them skip a thing and all the time making them go back, and back again. Even so they were making progress. Larry Barstow had made his drive, and Manuel Kimball had made his.

When the break came it was so simple and natural, and went along so easy with all the rest of it, that for a minute I didn't realize what was happening. Wolfe was saying to Chunky Mike:

"Then you handed Barstow his driver. Did you tee up his ball?"

"Yes, sir. — No — I couldn't, because I was over hunting a ball he

had put in the rough with his mashie."

"Exactly, Michael, you told us before you were hunting a ball. I wondered then how you could have teed up for Barstow."

William Riley spoke. "He teed up himself. The ball rolled off and I fixed it for him."

"Thank you, William. — So you see, Michael, you did not tee up for him. Wasn't the heavy golf bag a nuisance while you were hunting the lost ball?"

"Naw, we get used to it."

"Did you find the ball?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do with it?"

"Put it in the ball pocket."

"Do you state that as a fact or an assumption?"

"I put it in. I remember."

"Right away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you must have had the bag with you while you were hunting the ball. In that case, you could not have handed Barstow his driver when he teed off, because you weren't there. He could not have removed it from the bag himself, because the bag wasn't there. Had you perhaps handed him the driver previously?"

"Sure. I must have."

"Michael! We need something much better than *must have*. You did or you didn't. Remember that you are supposed to have told us —"

William Riley butted in: "Hey! Mike, that's why he borrowed old

Kimball's driver, because you were off looking for the ball."

"Ah." Wolfe shut his eyes for a tenth of a second and then opened them again. "William, it is unnecessary to shout. Who borrowed Mr. Kimball's driver?"

"Barstow did."

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't think so, I know. I had it out ready to hand to old Kimball, and Barstow's ball rolled off his tee and I fixed it for him, and when I stood up old Kimball was saying to Barstow, 'Use mine,' and Barstow reached out and I handed old Kimball's driver to him."

"And he used it?"

"Sure. He drove right away. Mike didn't come back with the bag until after old Kimball had drove too."

I was having all I could do to stay in my chair. I wanted to do a dance like Ray Bolger, and pin a bunch of orchids on William Riley, and throw my arms halfway around Wolfe, which was as far as they would go. I was afraid to look at Wolfe for fear I would grin so hard and wide I'd bust my jaw.

He was after the pale skinny kid and the one that wanted to be a good citizen, but neither of them remembered anything about Barstow borrowing the driver. The skinny one said he had his eyes glued far out on the fairway, spotting the place where Manuel Kimball had pulled his drive into the bushes, and the good citizen just didn't remember. Wolfe turned to Chunky Mike. Mike could not

say positively that Barstow's driver had been in the bag when he had had it with him hunting the ball, but he could not remember handing it to Barstow, and he could not remember receiving it back and returning it to the bag. During all this William Riley was straining his politeness to keep still. Finally Wolfe got back to him:

"Excuse me, William. Do not think I doubt your memory or your fidelity to truth. Corroboration is always helpful. And it might be thought a little curious that you had forgotten so informing a detail."

The boy protested, "I hadn't forgotten it, I just didn't happen to think of it."

"You mean that you have not included that incident in any of your recitals to your friends?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, William. I put my question badly, but I see that you have the intelligence to stick to the main clause. Possibly you mentioned the incident to Mr. Anderson?"

The boy shook his head. "I haven't seen Mr. Anderson. The detective came and asked me a few questions, not much."

"I see." Wolfe sighed, deep and long, and pushed the button. "It is tea time, messieurs."

Of course for Wolfe that meant beer. I got up and collected the boys and herded them into the kitchen; sure enough, the watermelon was intact. I cut it into four quarters and passed it around. Fritz, having been

to answer Wolfe's bell, was arranging a glass and two bottles on a tray; but as he went down the hall I noticed that he turned towards the stairs instead of the office. I glanced at my wrist. It was two minutes to four. The son-of-a-gun had saved his schedule! I left the boys with the melon and hurried out and caught him on his way to the elevator. He said:

"Give the boys my thanks, pay them adequately but not generously, for I am not a generous man, and take them home. Before you leave, telephone the office of E. D. Kimball and learn when he is expected to return from Chicago. He is probably still alive, since he had either the shrewdness or the luck to remove himself a thousand miles from his destiny. If by any chance he has returned get him here at once; on that there must be no delay."

"Yes, sir. And don't you think that if this news got to Mr. Anderson it would only confuse and upset him? Hadn't I better try to persuade the boys to keep it in the family?"

"No, Archie. It is always wiser, where there is a choice, to trust to inertia. It is the greatest force in the world."

When I got back to the kitchen Fritz was cutting an apple pie.

After I had finished delivering the caddies here and there all over Westchester, I certainly would have loved to run over to Kimball's place and say to Manuel, "Would you mind telling me whether your father keeps

his golf bag in his locker at the club and whether you have a key to it?" I had an idea he would recognize that as a question that couldn't be answered just by lifting his eyebrows. I already had him down for two thousand volts. But I realized that if it was him we had a big advantage in his ignorance of what we had found out, and I also realized that if I expected Manuel Kimball to be arrested and convicted of murder there would have to be a little more evidence than the fact that he made me nervous.

I had another temptation, to stop in at Anderson's office and offer to bet him ten thousand dollars that nobody had murdered Peter Oliver Barstow. Wolfe had certainly started a game of hide-and-seek. For two days he and I had been the only two people alive, except the man that did it, who knew that Barstow had been murdered; now we were the only two, with the same exception plus the caddies, who knew that he had been killed by accident.

I did go to the Green Meadow Club, after getting the last caddy delivered; it was close by. I went intending to go into the locker question a little, but after I arrived I got cold feet. It might ruin everything if it became known that we had the faintest interest in lockers, since it was common knowledge that Barstow's bag had never been in his. So I just had a little talk with the caddy master and said hello to the chief steward. Maybe I was hoping to get

another eyeful of Manuel Kimball, but I didn't see him anywhere.

E. D. Kimball, as his son had told me, had a grain brokerage office on Pearl Street. When I had telephoned there a little after four o'clock I had been told that Kimball was expected back from Chicago the next day, Friday, on the Century. If it hadn't been for that I think I would have tried to start something there in Westchester that evening, if it had been nothing more than to wait till dark and sneak over to the Kimball place and peek in at the windows; but with Kimball on the way there was nothing to do but wait. I went on home.

After dinner that evening Wolfe had me take my notebook and read to him again about my visit to Manuel Kimball, also everything that Sarah and Larry Barstow had said about him, though that wasn't much. We had a general discussion and got our minds to fit; we even considered the possibility that the lending of the driver had been planned and that old Kimball had murdered Barstow, but of course that was out, that was nothing but drivel. I took a few cracks at Manuel, but when Wolfe put it up to me seriously I had to say that not only was there no evidence against Manuel, there wasn't even any reason to suspect him. As far as I knew, it was no more likely to be him than any other member of the Green Meadow Club who had had opportunity to get at the Kimball locker.

"All the same," I insisted, "if he was my son I'd send him on a trip around the world and build a fence across the Pacific Ocean so he couldn't get through."

Before we went to bed Wolfe outlined again my program for the following day. I didn't care much for the first number on it, but of course he was right; the caddies were sure to talk, and the talk would get to Anderson, and it wouldn't hurt us any to get there first since the information was certain to reach him anyhow. I could perform that errand of mercy and still get to Kimball's office almost as soon as he arrived from Grand Central.

So early the next morning found me in the roadster bound for White Plains again. I was hoping the same motor cop would trip me up, it would have been so neat, since I could have handed him the same yarn as the day before and maybe this time have had the pleasure of an escort to the courthouse. But I made it from Woodlawn to the Main Street bridge without seeing anything more excited than a squirrel running up a tree.

I was creeping along Main Street behind three lumbering buses, like a pony following the elephants in a circus parade, when an idea struck me. I liked it. Wolfe seemed to have the notion that all he needed to do to have anybody call at his office from the Dalai Lama to Al Capone was to tell me to go and get him, but I knew from long experience that

you never knew when you were going to run up against someone with as many feet as a centipede and all of them reluctant. And here was I, not only supposed to haul a prominent grain broker out of his office immediately upon his return from a week's absence, but also headed for a revelation to the District Attorney that would probably result in my having the pleasure of meeting H. R. Corbett or some other flat-footed myrmidon in the anteroom of E. D. Kimball's office — and wouldn't that have been nice? So I parked the roadster in the first available spot and went to a telephone, and called up Wolfe and told him we were putting the soup before the cocktail. He was a little stubborn and gave me an argument, because he was full of the idea that it would pay us to hand Anderson something before he inevitably got hold of it himself, but when he saw that I intended to go on talking right up to a dollar's worth he said all right, I could return to New York and proceed to Pearl Street and wait for my victim.

On the way back I reflected that it was just as well the motor cop hadn't favored me with his attention after all.

When I got to the number on Pearl Street and left the elevator at the tenth floor, I discovered that E. D. Kimball & Company wasn't only selling chicken feed to backyard poultry kings. It had a suite that took up half the floor, with its name on doors everywhere and a

double one covered with the names of exchanges all over the country for an entrance. The clock on the wall said a quarter to ten; if the Century was on time it was already at Grand Central, and Kimball might be expected in fifteen or twenty minutes.

I spoke to a girl at a desk, and after using the telephone she took me to an inside room and left me with a square-jawed guy who had his feet on the window sill looking at the morning paper. He said, "Just a minute," and I sat down. After a little he threw the paper on his desk and turned around.

"Mr. E. D. Kimball will be here pretty soon," I said. "I know he'll be busy catching up with the week he's been away. But before he gets started on that I need ten minutes with him on an urgent personal matter. I'm a private detective; here's my card. He never heard of me; I work for Nero Wolfe. Can you fix it for me?"

"What do you want?"

I shook my head. "It really is personal, and it's damn urgent. You'll just have to trust my honest young face. If you think it's a racket phone the Metropolitan Trust Company at Thirty-fourth Street. They'll tell you I make a little change in my spare time, tending baby carriages."

Square jaws grinned. "I don't know. Mr. Kimball has a dozen appointments; the first one is ten-thirty. I'm his secretary, I know more about his business than he does. You'd better tell me."

"I'm sorry, it has to be him."

"All right, I'll see what I can do. Go on out front — no, wait here. Want to look at the paper?"

He tossed me the paper and got up and gathered some mail and stuff together and left the room with them. At a quick early breakfast I had taken a glance at the front page but hadn't had time for more. Turning through, I saw that the Barstow case was already back to page seven, and not much of it there. Anderson was saying that "progress was being made in the investigation." Dear old progress, I thought, you haven't changed a bit since I saw you last, except you're covered with wrinkles and your teeth are falling out. The coroner had nothing definite on the poison, but soon would have. There had never been, in any paper that I had seen, any hint of a suspicion that it was a family job; and now, I thought, there never would be. But this piece took another little crack at Dr. Bradford, and I knew it would be a long time before he would be able to look coronary thrombosis in the face without swallowing hard. I turned to the sports page.

The door opened, and the secretary was there.

"Mr. Goodwin. This way."

In the next room but one, a big room with windows on two sides, a lot of old furniture and a ticker going in a corner, a man sat at a desk. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was turning gray, and while he wasn't fat there was size to him. He looked

worried but amused, as if someone had just told him a funny story but he had a toothache. I wondered whether it was the worry or the amusement that came from what the secretary had told him but found out on acquaintance that it was neither, he always looked that way.

The secretary said, "This is the man, Mr. Kimball."

Kimball grunted and asked me what I wanted. I said that my business was strictly personal. Kimball said, "In that case you'd better take it up with my secretary so I won't have the bother of turning it over to him." He laughed and the secretary smiled and I grinned.

I said, "I only asked for ten minutes, so if you don't mind I'll get started. Nero Wolfe would like to have you call at his office this morning at eleven o'clock."

"Goodness gracious!" The amusement was on top. "Is Nero Wolfe the King of England or something?"

I nodded. "Something. I'll tell you, Mr. Kimball, you'll get this quicker and easier if you let me do it my own way. Just humor me. On Sunday, June fourth, Peter Oliver Barstow died suddenly while he was playing golf with his son and you and your son. On Thursday the eighth you left for Chicago. On Sunday the eleventh the results of an autopsy were announced. I suppose it was in the Chicago papers?"

"Oh, that's it." The worry had ascended. "I knew that would be a nuisance when I got back. I read a

lot of poppycock about poison and a needle and whatnot." He turned to his secretary. "Blaine, didn't I write you this would be a nuisance when I returned?"

The secretary nodded. "Yes, sir. You have an appointment at eleven-thirty with a representative of the Westchester District Attorney. I hadn't had time to mention it."

I kept my grin inside. "It's-not poppycock, Mr. Kimball. Barstow was killed by a poisoned needle shot out of the handle of a golf driver. That's wrapped up. Now come with me a minute. Here you are at the first tee, ready to shoot. All four of you with your caddies. — No, don't wander off somewhere, stay with me, this is serious. Here you are. Larry Barstow drives. Your son Manuel drives. Peter Oliver Barstow is ready to drive; you are standing near him; remember? His ball rolls off its tee and your caddy fixes it because his caddy is off hunting a ball. Remember? He is ready to drive but hasn't got his driver because his caddy is off with his bag. You say, 'Use mine,' and your caddy straightens up from fixing his ball and hands him your driver. Remember? He drives with your driver, and then jumps and begins rubbing his belly because a wasp stung him. It was that wasp, that came out of your driver, that killed him. Twenty minutes later he was dead."

Kimball was listening to me with a frown, with the worry and amusement both gone. He went on frown-

ing. When he finally spoke all he said was, "Poppycock."

"No," I said. "You can't make it poppycock just by pronouncing it. Anyway, poppycock or not, it was your driver Barstow used on the first tee. You remember that?"

He nodded. "I do. I hadn't thought of it, but now that you remind me I recall the scene perfectly. It was just as you —"

"Mister Kimball!" The secretary was secretaring. "It would be better perhaps if you . . . that is, upon reflection . . ."

"Better if I what? — Oh. No, Blaine. I knew this would be a nuisance, I knew it very well. Certainly Barstow used my driver. Why shouldn't I say so? I barely knew Barstow. Of course the poisoned needle story is a lot of poppycock, but that won't keep it from being a nuisance."

"It'll be worse than a nuisance, Mr. Kimball." I hitched my chair towards him. "Look here. The police don't know yet that Barstow used your driver. The District Attorney doesn't know it. I'm not suggesting that you hide anything from them; they'll find it out anyway. But whether you think the poisoned needle is poppycock or not, they don't. They know that Barstow was killed by a needle that came out of his driver on the first tee, and when they find out that it was your driver he used, what are they going to do? They won't arrest you for murder just like that, but they'll have you

looking in the dictionary for a better word than nuisance. My advice is, see Nero Wolfe. Take your lawyer along if you want to, but see him quick."

Kimball was pulling at his lip. He let his hand fall. At length he said, "Goodness gracious."

"Yes, sir, all of that."

He looked at his secretary. "You know, Blaine, I have no respect for lawyers."

"No, sir."

Kimball got up. "This is a fine to-do. I have told you before, Blaine, that there is just one thing in the world I am good at. Trading. I am a good trader, and that is surprising when you consider how soft I am, really. Soft-hearted. With the more personal aspects of life, I do not know how to deal." He was moving back and forth behind his desk. "Yes, this appears to be more than a nuisance. Goodness gracious. What would you do, Blaine?"

I glared at the secretary. He hesitated. "If you care to go to see this Nero Wolfe, I could go with you. If I were you I would take a lawyer."

"What appointments have I?"

"The usual sort of thing, nothing important. At eleven-thirty the man from the Westchester District Attorney."

"Oh, I would miss him. Well, tell him anything. How's the ticker?"

"Firm at the opening. Cotton easing off."

Kimball turned to me. "Where is this Nero Wolfe? Bring him here."

"Impossible, Mr. Kimball. He is . . ." But Wolfe had once found out that I had told a man he was infirm, and I didn't want that to happen again. "He is an eccentric genius. It's only up to Thirty-fifth Street. I've got my car down below and I'd be glad to run you up."

Kimball said, "I've only met one genius in my life; he was an Argentine cowboy. A *gaucho*. All right. Wait for me in the front office."

Back in the front room I had first entered, I sat on the edge of a chair. Meeting E. D. Kimball and looking at him and talking with him had somehow cleared my mind. I saw plainly what I should have realized the night before, that the minute it came out that it was Kimball's driver that had been turned into what Wolfe called a lethal toy, and the minute Kimball himself arrived on the scene, we were probably turning into the home-stretch. It was the same as if you found a man murdered and by some kind of hocus-pocus were able to bring him back to life long enough to ask him who killed him, and get his answer. That's what E. D. Kimball was, a man who had been murdered and was still living. I had to get him up to Wolfe's place and lock the door, and get him there quick, before Corbett got a chance at him — or, as far as that was concerned, anyone else. Anyone at all. How did I know but what it was the secretary, Square-jaw Blaine, who had had that driver made and found oppor-

tunity to get it into Kimball's bag? At that moment, as I sat there on the edge of the chair, Blaine might be sticking a knife into Kimball as he had into Carlo Maffei. . . .

It was ten-fifty. I got up and began walking up and down the linoleum. Anderson's man — I was sure it would be Corbett — was due at half-past eleven, and he might take it into his thick head to come early and wait. I had just decided to ask the girl at the desk to phone into Blaine for me, when the inner door opened and Kimball appeared with his hat on. I was pretty glad to see him. He nodded at me and I jumped to the entrance door to open it for him.

As we got into the elevator I observed, "Mr. Blaine isn't coming."

Kimball shook his head. "He's needed here more than I need him. I like your face. I find I usually do like a man's face, and it pays every time. Trust is one of the finest things in the world, trust in your fellow man."

Yes, I thought to myself, I'll bet a successful trader like you can use up lots of trust.

It was only half a block to where I had parked the roadster. I cut across as far west as I could get to avoid the traffic, and it was still short of eleven-fifteen when I was ushering Kimball in ahead of me at Wolfe's door.

I took Kimball to the front room and asked him to wait there a minute, then returned to the entrance

and made sure the latch was caught. Then I went to the kitchen. Fritz was making cherry tarts; a pan was just out of the oven and I nabbed one and stuffed it in and damn near burned my tongue off. I told Fritz, "One guest for lunch and don't put any poison in it. And be careful who you let in; if there's any doubt, call me."

In the office, Wolfe was at his desk. As soon as I saw him I stopped, exasperated, for he was cleaning house. He had only one drawer in his desk, a wide shallow one in the middle, and since he had begun having his beer in bottles instead of brought up from the basement in a pitcher, he had formed the habit, every time he opened a bottle, of pulling the drawer out and dropping the bottle cap in there. Fritz wasn't supposed to open any drawers in the office, and I knew Wolfe had some sort of a nutty notion that he was saving the bottle caps for something so I had let them alone. Now, when I entered, he had the drawer half out and was scattering the caps all over the desk, arranging them in piles.

I said, "Mr. E. D. Kimball is in the front room. Do you want him to come in and help you?"

"The devil." Wolfe looked around at his piles, and at me helplessly. He sighed. "Can't he wait a while?"

"Of course, sure. How would next week do?"

He sighed again. "Confound it. Bring him in."

"With that junk scattered all over

the desk? — Oh, all right, I told him you're eccentric." I had kept my voice lowered; now I lowered it some more to let him know how Kimball had shaped up and what I had said to him. He nodded, and I went to get Kimball.

Kimball had his worried-amused look back on again. I introduced him and pulled a chair around for him, and after they had exchanged a few words I said to Wolfe, "If you won't need me, sir, I'll get on to those reports." He nodded, and I got fixed at my desk with papers all around and half underneath a pad which I used for a notebook on such occasions. I had got my signs so abbreviated that I could get down every word of some pretty fast talk and still give the impression to a careless eye that I was just shuffling around looking for last week's delicatessen bill.

Wolfe was saying, "You are perfectly correct, Mr. Kimball. A man's time is his own only by sufferance. There are many ways in which he may be dispossessed: flood, famine, war, marriage — not to speak of death, which is the most satisfactory of all because it closes the question finally."

"Goodness gracious." Kimball was fidgety. "I do not see why that should make it satisfactory."

"You came very near finding out, a week ago last Sunday." Wolfe wiggled a finger at him. "You are a busy man, Mr. Kimball, and you have just returned to your office

after a week's absence. Why, under those circumstances, did you take time this morning to come to see me?"

Kimball stared at him. "That's what I want you to tell me."

"Good. You came because you were confused. That is not a desirable condition for a man in the extreme of danger, as you are. I see no indication in your face of alarm or fear, merely confusion. That is astonishing, knowing as I do what Mr. Goodwin has told you. He has informed you that on June fourth, twelve days ago, it was nothing but inadvertence that killed Peter Oliver Barstow, and the same inadvertence saved your life. You met his statement with incredulity, crudely expressed. Why?"

"Because it's nonsense." Kimball was impatient. "Rubbish."

"Before, you said poppycock. Why?"

"Because it is. I didn't come here to argue about that. If the police get into difficulties trying to explain something they don't happen to understand and want to make up any sort of a fancy tale to cover themselves, that's all right, I believe in letting every man handle his own business his own way, but they don't need to expect me to take any stock in it, and they can leave me out of it. I'm a busy man, with something better to do. You're wrong, Mr. Wolfe, I didn't come to see you because I was confused, and I certainly didn't come to give you a chance to

try to scare me. I came because the police apparently are trying to mix me up in a fancy tale that might give me a lot of trouble and publicity I don't want, and your man gave me to understand you could show me how to avoid it. If you can, go ahead and I'll pay you for it. If you can't, say so, and I'll find better advice."

"Well." Wolfe leaned back in his chair and let his half-shut eyes study the broker's face. Finally he shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't show you how to escape trouble, Mr. Kimball. I might with good fortune show you how to escape death. Even that is uncertain."

"I have never expected to escape death."

"Do not quibble. I mean of course unpleasant and imminent death. I shall be frank with you, sir. If I do not at once bid you good day and let you depart on your business, it is not because of my certain knowledge that you are confronting death like a fool. I refrain from contributing to certain Christian enterprises because I think that no man should be saved by coercion. But here I am guided by self-interest. Mrs. Barstow has offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars for the discovery of her husband's murderer. I intend to discover him; and to do so I need only learn who it was that tried to kill you on June fourth and will proceed to do so within a reasonable time if means are not found of preventing him. If you will help me, it will be

convenient for both of us; if you will not, it may well be that only through some misstep or mischance in his successful second attempt shall I be able to bring him to account for his abortive first one. Naturally it would be all the same to me."

Kimball shook his head. But he didn't get up; instead, he was settling into his chair. Still he showed no sign of alarm, he merely looked interested. He said, "You're a good talker, Mr. Wolfe. I don't think you're going to be of any use to me, since you seem to like fancy tales as well as the police, but you're a good talker."

"Thank you. You like good talking?"

Kimball nodded. "I like everything good. Good talking, and good trading, and good manners, and good living. I don't mean high living, I mean good. I've tried to live a good life myself, and I like to think everyone else does. I know some can't, but I think they try to. I was thinking of that in the car a little while ago, riding up here with your man. I'm not saying that the tale he told me made no impression on me at all; of course it did. When I told him it was poppycock I meant it, and I still mean it, but nevertheless it got me thinking. What if somebody had tried to kill me? Who would it be?"

He paused, and Wolfe murmured at him, "Well, who would it be?"

"Nobody." Kimball was emphatic.

I thought to myself, if this guy

turns out like Barstow, so lovable a mosquito wouldn't bit him, I'm through.

Wolfe said, "I once met a man who had killed two other men because he had been bettered in a horse trade."

Kimball laughed. "I'm glad he wasn't in grain. If his method of averaging down was universal I would have been killed not once, but a million times. I'm a good trader, it's the one thing I'm proud of. What I love is wheat. Of course what you love is a fancy tale and a good murder, and that's all right, that's your business. What I love is wheat. Do you know there are seven hundred million bushels of wheat in the world? And I know where every one of them is this minute. Every one."

"You probably own a hundred or so yourself."

"No, not one. I'm out. Tomorrow I'll be back in, or next week. — But I was saying, I'm a good trader. I've come out on top in a good many deals, but no one has any kick coming. I've stuck to the rules. That's what I was thinking on the way riding up here. I don't know all the details of this Barstow business, just what I've read in the papers. As I understand it, they haven't found the driver. I don't believe it ever existed. But even if they found it, and even if I did lend mine to Barstow on the first tee, I still would have a hard time believing anyone intended it for me. I've stuck to the

rules and played fair, in my business and in my private life."

He paused. Wolfe murmured, "There are many kinds of injuries, Mr. Kimball. Real, fancied, material, spiritual, trivial, fatal . . ."

"I've never injured anyone."

"Really? Come now. The essence of sainthood is expiation. If you will permit it, take me. Whom have I not injured? I don't know why your presence should stimulate me to confession, but it does. Forget the Barstow murder, since to you it is poppycock; forget the police; we shall find means of preventing their becoming a nuisance to you. I enjoy talking with you; unless your affairs are really pressing. I would not keep you from anything urgent."

"You won't." Kimball looked pleased. "When anything's urgent I attend to it. The office has got along without me for a week; an hour more won't hurt them."

Wolfe nodded approvingly. "Will you have a glass of beer?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink."

"Ah." Wolfe pressed the button. "You're an extraordinary man, sir. You have learned to abstain, and you are at the same time a good business man and a philosopher. — One glass, Fritz. — But we were speaking of injuries, and I was hovering on confession. Whom have I not injured? That of course is rhetorical; I would not pose as a ruffian; and I suffer from a romantic conscience. Even so, making all allowances, it is not easy for me to understand why I

am still alive. Less than a year ago a man sitting in the chair you now occupy promised to kill me at his earliest convenience. I had pulled the foundations of his existence from under him from purely mercenary motives. There is a woman living not twenty blocks from here, and a remarkably intelligent one, whose appetite and disposition would be vastly improved by news of my death. I could continue these examples almost to infinity. But there are others more difficult to confess and more impossible to condone. — Thank you, Fritz.”

Wolfe removed the opener from the drawer and opened a bottle and dropped the cap into the drawer before he closed it again. Then he filled a glass and gulped it down. Kimball was saying “Of course every man has to take the risks of his profession.”

Wolfe nodded. “That’s the philosopher in you again. It is easy to see, Mr. Kimball, that you are a cultured and an educated man. Perhaps you will understand the obscure psychology which prompts . . . well me for instance . . . to persist in an action which deserves unqualified condemnation. There is a woman under this roof at this moment, living on the top floor of this building, who cannot wish me dead only because her heart is closed to venom by its own sweetness. I torture her daily, hourly. I know I do and that knowledge tortures me; still I persist. You can guess at the

obscurity of the psychology and the depth of the torture when I tell you that the woman is my mother.”

I got it all down as he said it, and I almost glanced up at him in surprise, he said it so convincingly, with little emotion in his voice but the impression that the feeling underneath was so overwhelming that it was kept down only by a determined will. For a second he darned near had me feeling sorry for his mother, though it was I who, balancing the bank account each month, checked off the debit item for his remittance to her at her home in Budapest.

“Goodness gracious,” Kimball said.

Wolfe downed another glass of beer and slowly shook his head from side to side. “You will understand why I can recite a category of injuries. I can justly claim familiarity.”

It seemed to me that Kimball wasn’t going to take the hint. He was looking sympathetic and self-satisfied. In fact, he smirked: “I’m wondering why you think I’m an educated man.”

Wolfe’s eyebrows went up. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“It’s a compliment if you think so. I quit school — out in Illinois — when I was twelve, and ran away from home. It wasn’t much of a home, with an uncle and aunt. My parents were dead. I haven’t been in a school since. If I’m educated it’s self-educated.”

“Not the worst kind.” Wolfe’s

voice was low and quiet, not much more than a murmur; the voice that he used to say "go on" without saying it. "You are another proof of it, sir. And New York is itself an education for a lad of that age if he has spirit and character."

"Probably. It might be, but I didn't come to New York. I went to Texas. After a year on the Panhandle, to Galveston, and from there to Brazil and the Argentine."

"Indeed! You did have spirit; and your education is cosmopolitan."

"Well, I covered a lot of territory. I was in South America twenty years, mostly in the Argentine. When I came back to the States I nearly had to go to school again to learn English. I've lived . . . well, I've lived a lot of funny ways. I've seen a lot of rough stuff and I've taken part in it, but wherever and whatever it was I always did one thing, I always stuck to the rules. When I came back to the States I was selling beef, but gradually I worked into grain. That was where I found myself; grain takes a man not afraid to guess and ready to ride his guess the way a *gaucho* rides a horse."

"You were a *gaucho*?"

"No, I've always been a trader. It was born in me. Now I wonder if you would believe this. Not that I'm ashamed of it; sitting in my office sometimes, with a dozen markets waiting to see which way I'm going to jump, I remember it and I'm proud of it. For two years I was a

rope peddler." He paused.

"Not really."

"Yes. Three thousand miles a season in the saddle. I still show it when I walk."

Wolfe was looking at him admiringly. "A real nomad, Mister Kimball. Of course you weren't married then."

"No. I married later, in Buenos Aires. I had an office then on the Avenida de Mayo . . ."

He stopped. Wolfe poured another glass of beer. Kimball was looking at him, but his eyes were following the movement without seeing it, for obviously the vision was inside. Something had pulled him up short and transported him to another scene.

Wolfe nodded at him and murmured. "A memory . . . I know."

Kimball nodded back. "Yes . . . a memory. That's a funny thing. Goodness gracious. It might almost seem as if I had thought of that on account of what you said about injuries. The different kinds, fancied injuries. Fatal injuries. But this wasn't one at all, the only injury was to me. And it wasn't fancied. But I have a conscience too, as you said you have, only I don't think there's anything romantic about it."

"The injury was to you."

"Yes. One of the worst injuries a man can suffer. It was thirty years ago, and it's still painful. I married a girl, a beautiful Argentine girl, and we had a baby boy. The boy was only two years old when I came home from a trip a day too early and

found my best friend in my bed. The boy was on the floor with his toys. I stuck to the rules; I've told myself a thousand times that if I had it to do over I'd do it again. I shot twice . . ."

Wolfe murmured, "You killed them."

"I did. The blood ran onto the floor and got on one of the toys. I left the boy there — I've often wondered why I didn't shoot him too, since I was sure he wasn't mine — and went to a café and got drunk. That was the last time I drank . . ."

"You came to the States . . ."

"A little later, a month later. There was no question of escaping, you don't have to run away from that in the Argentine, but I wound things up and left South America for good, and I've only been back once, four years ago."

"You brought the boy with you?"

"No. That's what I went back for. Naturally I didn't want him, my wife's family took him. They lived out on the pampas, that's where I got her from. The boy's name was Manuel, and that had been my friend's name; I had suggested naming him after my friend. I came back alone, and for twenty-six years I lived alone, and I found the market a better wife than the one I had tried. But I suppose there was a doubt in me all the time, or maybe as a man gets older he softens up. Maybe I just got lonely, or maybe I wanted to persuade myself that I really had a son. Four years ago I got things in

shape and went to Buenos Aires. I found him right away. The family had gone broke when he was young and they were mostly dead, and he had had a hard time of it, but he had made good. When I found him he was one of the best aviators in the Argentine army. I had to persuade him to break away. For a while he tried my office, but he wasn't cut out for it, and he's going into the airplane business with my money. I bought a place up in Westchester and built a new house on it, and I only hope when he gets married he won't take any trips that end the way mine did."

"Of course he knows . . . about his mother?"

"I don't think so. I don't know; it's never been mentioned. I hope not. Not that I've got any remorse about it; if I had it to do over I'd do it again. I don't pretend, even to him, that Manuel is exactly the son I would want to get if I could just file a buy order; after all, he's Argentine and I'm Illinois. But his name's Kimball and he's got a head on him. He'll get an American girl, I hope, and that will even it up."

"Indubitably." Wolfe had left his beer untasted so long that the foam was gone, leaving it as still as tea. He reached for the glass and gulped it. "Yes, Mr. Kimball, you proved your point; the injury was to you. But you . . . let us say . . . took care of it. If there was an injury to the boy you are repairing it handsomely. Your confession is scarcely

as damaging as mine; I perforce admit culpability; as Mr. Goodwin would say, I have no out. But if the boy feels the injury?"

"No."

"But if by chance he does?"

I saw Kimball's eyes fall. It was sometimes not easy to meet Wolfe's eyes, but Kimball the trader should have been impervious to any eye. He wasn't. He didn't try it again. Abruptly he got up and, standing, said:

"He doesn't. I took no such advantage of your confession, Mr. Wolfe."

"You may, sir." Wolfe didn't stir. "You are welcome to all advantages. Why not be frank? There is no danger in me to the innocent." He looked at his watch. "In five minutes there will be lunch. Lunch with me. I do not pretend to be your friend, but certainly for you or yours I have no ill-will. Thirty years ago, Mr. Kimball, you faced a bitter disappointment and acted upon it with energy; have you lost your nerve? Let us see what might be done. Lunch with me."

But Kimball wouldn't. As a matter of fact, it seemed to me that for the first time he looked scared. He wanted to get away from there. I didn't quite get it.

Wolfe tried some more to persuade him to stay, but Kimball wasn't having any. He quit looking scared and got polite. He said goodness gracious, he had no idea it was so late, and that he was sorry Wolfe

was able to suggest nothing to prevent the police from making a nuisance of themselves, and that he trusted Wolfe would consider their conversation confidential.

I went to the door with him. I offered to drive him back downtown, but he said no, he could get a taxi at the corner. From the stoop I watched him shoving off, and he was right, you could see he had been in a saddle enough to bend his knees out.

When I got back to the office Wolfe wasn't there, so I went on to the dining-room. He was getting himself set in front of his chair, with Fritz behind ready to push it. After he had got fixed I sat down. I had never known him to discuss business during a meal, but I was thinking that day he might. He didn't. However, he did violate a custom; ordinarily he loved to talk as he ate, leisurely and rambling on any subject that might happen to suggest itself, as much to himself as to me, I suspected, though I think I was always a good audience. That day he didn't say a word. In between his bites I could see his lips pushing out and pulling back again. He didn't even remember to commend Fritz for the dishes; so as Fritz cleared away for the coffee I tossed a wink at him and he nodded back with a solemn smile, as much as to say that he understood and would bear no grudge.

In the office after lunch Wolfe got into his chair, still silent. I straight-

ened up the papers on my desk and removed from the pad the sheets that I had used and clipped them together. Then I sat down and waited for the spirit to move him. After a while he pulled a sigh that would have fed a blacksmith's bellows all afternoon, shoved his chair back so he could get the drawer of his desk open, and began raking the piles of bottle caps into the drawer. I watched him. When it was finished and the drawer shut he said:

"Mr. Kimball is an unhappy man, Archie."

I said, "He's a slicker."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, unhappy. He is beset from many sides. His son wants to kill him, and intends to. But if Kimball admits that fact, even to himself, he is done for and he knows it. His son, and through his son the future Kimballs, are now all he has to live for. So he cannot admit it and will not. But if he doesn't admit it, and not only admit it but do something about it, again he is done for, for shortly he will die and probably in a thoroughly disagreeable manner. The dilemma is too much for him, and no wonder, for it has additional complications. He wants help, but he dares not ask for it. The reason he dares not ask for it is that like all mortal fools he hopes against all hope. What if — he does not admit this, but no man is so poor that he cannot afford a *what if*, — what if his son did attempt to kill him and by mischance killed Barstow instead? Might the son not

take that mischance as an omen? Might he not be persuaded, — the father could even discuss it with him, man to man, — might he not be persuaded to make a sensible trade with destiny and give his father's life for the one he had inadvertently taken? That way Kimball could live to see a grandchild on his knee. In the meantime, until that trade, which would be the most triumphant one of his career, could be consummated, there would be great and constant danger. It would be enough to frighten a younger and an honest man. But he dares not ask for help, for in doing so he would expose his son to a peril as great as the one that confronts himself. It is an admirable dilemma; I have rarely seen one with so many horns and all of them so sharp. It so confused Kimball that he did something which I suspect has been rare with him; he acted like a fool. He exposed his son without gaining any protection for himself. The facts behind the fear he blurted out; the fear itself he denied."

Wolfe stopped. He leaned back in his chair and let his chin fall and laced his fingers on his belly.

"Okay," I said. "Okay for Kimball. Now Manuel. I told you he made me nervous. But aside from that, shall I take the typewriter and make a list of all the swell proof we have that he killed Barstow?"

"Confound it," Wolfe sighed. "I know, the picture must be varnished. The can is empty, Archie. In

fact, the can itself is gone. There is nothing."

I nodded. "If I may make a suggestion? There is a flying field at Armonk, which is only a few miles from Pleasantville. If I may drive up there and get curious?"

"You may. But I doubt if he used a public flying field. He would prefer privacy. So before you go, try this. Take this down."

"Long?"

"Very short."

I got a pad and pencil. Wolfe dictated:

Whoever saw me land in the pasture with my airplane Monday evening, June fifth, please communicate. Am winning a bet and will share.

I said, "Good. Swell. But it might have been a golf links."

Wolfe shook his head. "Still too public, and too much loud objection. Leave it pasture; it will have to be definite. — No, do not phone it. Stop at the *Times* office on your way uptown; leave it, and make sure the answers will reach us. Also — yes, the other papers, morning and evening, with similar proper arrangements. Manuel Kimball is ingenious enough to be annoying; should he see the advertisement it might occur to him to acquire the answers."

I got up. "All right, I'm off."

"Just a moment. Does White Plains come before Armonk?"

"Yes."

"Then on your way see Anderson. Tell him everything except Carlo

Maffei and the Argentine. Present it to him; a fine gesture. Also tell him that E. D. Kimball is in imminent and constant danger and should have protection. Kimball of course will deny it and the precaution will be futile; nevertheless, when men undertake to meddle in the affairs of violent persons, as you and I do, certain duties are assumed and should not be neglected."

I knew it had to be done, but I said, "I'd just as soon give Anderson a piece of information as tip a sub-way guard."

"Soon, now," Wolfe replied, "we may be in a position to send him a bill."

What with stopping to put the ads in and the Friday afternoon summer traffic, by the time I got to the District Attorney's office in White Plains it was nearly four o'clock. I hadn't bothered to telephone ahead to see if Anderson or Derwin would be in because I had to go through White Plains anyhow to get to Armonk.

They were both there. The girl at the desk threw me a smile when I went up to her, and I liked that; when the time comes that they stop remembering you it means that your pan is losing its shine. Instead of asking my name or who I wanted to see, she nodded and pressed down a key on the switchboard. I said, "Who do you think I am, the prodigal son?" She said, "They'll kill you instead of the calf." After she had talked into the phone a couple of seconds one of

the doors snapped open and Derwin came out.

He came up to me. "What do you want?"

I grinned. "This is hot. Can you get Ben Cook here in a hurry?" Because I didn't like fits I went right on, "I want to tell Mr. Anderson something. Or you, or both of you."

I never did find out, I don't know to this day, what that White Plains bunch thought they had been doing during the six days that had passed since the autopsy. There was a hint or two, of course; that Friday afternoon Anderson told me that Corbett had spent two days at Holland University. Probably they got hold of a rumor that there was a student there whom Barstow had kept in school an extra hour or some such sizzler. I know they hadn't come within a mile of anything warm. Though it was hard to believe, it was a fact that Anderson didn't even know that Barstow had been using a new bag of golf clubs that had been given to him by his wife as a birthday present, until I told him. I only got one piece of news that afternoon; a New York chemist had said definitely that Barstow's blood showed snake venom. It was that report that had got Anderson and Derwin's minds off of golf clubs and dwelling fondly on copperheads; and though I hate like the devil to admit it, it gave me a few bad hours too. Although it left the needle unexplained, I had seen odder things than a needle in a man's stomach ac-

counted for by coincidence. Copperheads were not unknown in Westchester; what if one had been visiting the Green Meadow Club that Sunday and bit Barstow? On the foot or anywhere. It was about good enough for a headache. The snake venom report hadn't been given to the newspapers, and it wasn't given to me until after Anderson and Derwin had my tale, so it didn't cramp my style.

And, of course, even if the Green Meadow fairway had been carpeted with copperheads a foot deep, Anderson and Derwin couldn't get around the fact that Nero Wolfe had told them exactly what the autopsy would show them.

Derwin took me into Anderson's room. Anderson was there with another man, not a dick, he looked like a lawyer. I sat down and hooked my panama on my knee.

Anderson said, "What's on your mind?"

I just simply didn't like that man. I couldn't even have any fun with him, to speak of, because whatever it was disagreeable about him, his face and his manner was so deep and primitive that the only possible way to get any real satisfaction would have been to haul off and plug him in the nose. Derwin was different; he certainly wasn't my favorite uncle, but he would take a lot of kidding.

I said, "Information from Nero Wolfe. Maybe you'd better call a stenographer."

He had to pass a few remarks first, but I went patient and forbearing on him. What was the use of thinking up a lot of snappy comebacks when I couldn't use the one I wanted to? So pretty soon he saw he wasn't getting anywhere, and called a stenographer, and I spicled it off. I told about the birthday present, and the whereabouts of Barstow's golf bag and who had put it there, and the loan of Kimball's driver on the first tee. I suggested that they find out all about Kimball's bag, where he kept it and who had access to it, though I knew that anyone approaching from that direction would never get anywhere, for Manuel must have had any number of opportunities. Then I gave them Wolfe's message about protection for Kimball. I made that strong. I said that Wolfe felt that the responsibility for the safety of a citizen whose life was in jeopardy was a burden for the authorities to assume, and that he would not be answerable, to himself or anyone else, for anything that might happen to E. D. Kimball at any moment.

When I got through Anderson asked questions, and some I answered and some I didn't. He kept it up quite a while, until finally I had to grin at him.

"Mr. Anderson," I said, "you're trying to lure me on."

He was smooth. "But not succeeding, Goodwin. I'll be frank with you. When the autopsy verified Wolfe's prediction, I thought he

knew who did it. When the reward was offered and he didn't grab it, I knew he didn't know. We know everything you do now, and a lot more, except the one detail of how Wolfe came to make the prediction in the first place. I'd like to know that, though I don't believe it can be of much value, since Wolfe doesn't get anywhere with it. All the same, you might tell me. I'll tell you anything and everything. For instance, this morning snake venom was identified in Barstow's blood."

"Thanks. That saves me the trouble of reading tonight's papers."

"The papers haven't got it. I can tell you a few other things too."

So he did; he mentioned Corbett's trip to the university and a lot of other junk, and wound it up with a lecture on copperheads. Wanting to get on to Armonk, and to be alone to see if the snake venom news sounded hollow when you dropped it on the sidewalk, I thanked him and got up and put on my hat, and he got sore. I didn't bother any more; I reminded him about protecting E. D. Kimball, and walked out.

Since it was only a few miles out of the way and I didn't know how long it would take me at Armonk, I decided to drop in at the Barstows first. From a booth on Main Street I telephoned; Sarah Barstow was home. Twenty minutes later I was turning into their drive. The same guard was there, and when I stopped he gave me a look and nodded me on.

Some people were on the front terrace having tea. I went to the side door, and Small took me to the sun-room at the back, only since it was afternoon the blinds were all up and the glass was in shadow. Small told me that Miss Barstow would join me shortly, and asked if I would have some tea.

I said, "You didn't think that up all alone."

Of course not a flicker. "Miss Barstow told me to offer you tea, sir."

"Sure. She would. A glass of milk would be nice."

In a minute he was back with the milk, and when it was about half gone Sarah Barstow came in. I had told her on the phone it was just a social call, nothing to worry about, and as I got up and looked at her coming towards me, natural and young and human, I thought to myself that if she ever started a clinic for broken hearts I'd be the first in line if I wasn't too busy. I said to her:

"You've had a nap since I saw you last."

She smiled. "I've slept forever. Sit down."

I took my chair and picked up my glass. "Thank you for the milk, Miss Barstow. It's swell milk, too. I'm sorry to call you away from your friends, but it won't take long. I've just been over at Mr. Anderson's office having a chat. I told him about the birthday present and about your night trip to the Tarrytown ferry.—

Now wait a minute, you certainly are quick on the trigger. It don't mean a thing, it was just strategy, you know, what generals lose battles with. That junk is all out. There never was any phony driver in your father's bag, when your mother gave it to him or any other time. Nobody ever tried to kill him. He died by an accident."

She was staring at me. I waited to let her digest it. She said, "Then it wasn't murder at all . . . Nero Wolfe was wrong . . . but how . . ."

"I didn't say it wasn't murder. Wolfe wasn't wrong. The accident happened on the first tee. Your father's caddy was off with his bag, and your father borrowed E. D. Kimball's driver. It was that borrowed driver that did it. It was a rotten break, that's all. Nobody wanted to kill him."

She said, "My father . . . I knew my father . . ."

I nodded. "Yes, I guess you knew your father all right. That's all I wanted to tell you, Miss Barstow. I didn't like to phone it, because I don't know when Anderson will want to release it. So it's confidential. I didn't want you to find out from him what I had told him and maybe think I had double-crossed you. If he should be so curious that he begins asking you why you go around throwing golf bags in the river, in spite of the fact that that's all washed up, tell him to go to hell. That's why I told you that. The

reason I told you about Kimball lending his driver was because I know it can't be any fun lying in bed wondering who murdered your father when you ought to be asleep. Nobody murdered him. But it would be okay to keep that in the family for awhile." I got up. "That's all."

She sat still. She looked up at me. "Are you going? I think I'll sit here a little. Thank you, Mr. Goodwin. — You didn't finish your milk."

I picked up the glass and emptied it and went on out. I was thinking that even on a busy day I might find time to drop in at that clinic.

By the time I got to Armonk it was after six o'clock, but the sun was still high. A couple of planes were perched on the field and another one was just landing. There were signs all around, FLY \$5, and TRY THE SKY, and other come-ons, painted on the fence and the walls of the wooden hangars. It wasn't much of a field as far as equipment was concerned, that is, it wasn't very elaborate, but the field itself was good-sized and well-kept and flat as a pancake. I parked the roadster off the highway and went through the gate alongside one of the hangars. There was no one around outside except the pilot and two passengers getting out of the plane that had just landed. I went along looking in doors and in the third hangar found some guys throwing pennies at a crack.

They straightened up and looked at me and I nodded.

"Hello." I grinned. "I hate to interrupt your game, but I'm looking for a map, a bound book of flying maps. Maybe that isn't the technical term for it, but I'm not a flyer."

One of them was just a kid. The other one, a little older, in a mechanic's uniform, shook his head.

"We don't sell maps."

"I don't mean I want to buy one. I'm looking for one, bound in red leather, that my brother left here a week ago Monday. June fifth, it was. You probably remember. He knew I was coming past here today on my way to the Berkshires and asked me to stop and get it. He landed here at your field, in his private plane, around six o'clock that evening, and took off again around ten. He's pretty sure he must have left the map here somewhere."

The mechanic was shaking his head. "He didn't land at this field."

I was surprised. "What? Of course he did. He ought to know what field he landed at."

"Maybe he ought to, but he don't, not if he says he landed here. There's been no machine here except ours for over a month, except a biplane that came down one morning last week."

"That's funny." I couldn't understand it. "Are you sure? Maybe you weren't here."

"I'm always here, mister. I sleep here. If you ask me, I think your brother had better find his map. I think he needs it."

"It sure looks that way. Are there any other fields around here?"

"Not very close. There's one at Danbury, and one up towards Poughkeepsie."

"Well. This is one on him. Sorry I interrupted your game. I'm much obliged."

"Don't mention it."

I went out and sat in the roadster to decide what to do. The mechanic hadn't talked like a man earning the five-spot someone had given him to keep his mouth shut; he had just been telling what had happened, or rather what hadn't happened. Armonk was out. Poughkeepsie, too; for although Manuel might have made it there in twenty minutes in his plane, he had to have time to get to wherever he had left his car and drive to where he was going to meet Carlo Maffei. He had almost certainly met Maffei near some subway station uptown in New York, and the date had been for seven-thirty. He could never have made it from Poughkeepsie. Danbury, I thought, was barely possible, and I headed the roadster north.

I didn't like to do that at all, for it was June 16, the anniversary of the day little Tommie Williamson had been restored safely to his parents in Wolfe's office, and Mr. and Mrs. Burke Williamson and Tommie — four years older now — were going to celebrate as usual by dining with Wolfe. Each year they tried to get him to go to their place, but they never succeeded. They were all

right, and I liked Tommie, but the point I had in mind was the importance that Fritz attached to that occasion. Of course he knew that Williamson owned a chain of hotels, and I suppose he wanted to show him what a pity it was that hotels never had anything fit to eat. As Saul Panzer would say, lovin' babe, what a feed! One-fifth of that cargo was labeled for my hold, and instead of being there to stow it away where it belonged, at eight o'clock that evening I was unenjoying myself at a fern-and-palm joint in Danbury with a plate of liver and bacon that had absolutely been fried in differential grease.

Nothing went right in Danbury. After the lubricated liver, I went out to the flying field. Nobody knew anything. I waited around, and finally, long after dark, a man showed up who gave me complete dissatisfaction. He kept records but didn't need to, for he remembered what minute the sun had set every day since Easter. When I left I was certain that Manuel Kimball had never been near the place; and though it was a grand summer night I didn't particularly enjoy the drive back to New York. It was after midnight when I reached Thirty-fifth Street; the Williamsons had departed and Wolfe had gone to bed.

In the top drawer of my desk was a note in his fine slender writing:

Archie, if you learned nothing, in the morning try the metal-worker adver-

tisement; and if your grace and charm can again entice Miss Fiore, have her here at eleven. N. W.

I never like to eat late at night, unless it seems unavoidable, but I went to the kitchen anyhow for a glass of milk and to look sadly over the remains like a man visiting the graveyard where his sweetheart's bones are resting. Then I went on upstairs and turned in.

I slept late. While I was eating breakfast Fritz told me about the dinner I had missed, but I was only politely interested; yesterday's meals never concern me much. Looking through the newspaper, I turned to the classified ads to see the one I had put in the day before; it was there, and I thought it read good. Before I went out I went to the office and cleaned around a little, for it wasn't going to be much of a morning.

One of the various little things that were keeping me doubtful about Manuel Kimball was the fact that the metalworker ad was keyed at the downtown office. Wouldn't he have been more apt — since even a man plotting murder will not ignore convenience — to use Times Square or 125th Street? But of course that wasn't a real objection, just one of the little things you think about when you're looking around for something to hang a chance on. In any event, I was counting on getting nowhere with that ad.

That's where I got to. To walk into the *Times* downtown classified

ad office and try to find out what girl took a particular ad two months before, and what kind of a person handed it in and who called for the replies, was about like asking a Coney Island lifeguard if he remembers the fellow with a bald head who went in bathing on the Fourth of July. I had stopped at the D. A.'s office on the way down and got Purley Stebbins to go with me with his badge, but the only one that did any good for was him, since I had to buy him a drink. By going over the files I did learn that the ad had appeared in the issue of April 16, and while that spoiled nothing since it fitted in all right, I couldn't even figure that it paid for the drink.

I took Purley back to his temple of justice and went on to Sullivan Street.

Mrs. Ricci wasn't going to let me in. She came to the door herself and put on a scowl as soon as she saw me. I grinned at her and told her I had come to take Anna Fiore for a ride, and I behaved like a gentleman in the face of all her observations until she began shoving the door on me so hard that my foot nearly slipped. Then I got business like.

"See here, Mrs. Ricci, wait a minute; you might as well listen while you've still got some breath. Now listen! Anna is in bad, not with us but with the police. Cops. She told us something that could get her in a lot of trouble if the police knew it. They don't know it and we don't want them to know it, but

they suspect something. My boss wants to put Anna wise. He's got to. Do you want her to go to jail? Come on now, and cut out the injured womanhood."

She glared at me. "You just lie."

"No. Never. Ask Anna. Trot her out."

"You stay here."

"Right."

She shut the door and I sat down on the top-step and lit a cigarette. Since it was Saturday the street was a madhouse again. I got hit on the shin with a ball and my eardrums began to stretch out, but otherwise it was a good show. I had just flipped the butt away when I heard the door open behind me and got up.

Anna came out with her hat and jacket on. Mrs. Ricci, standing behind her on the threshold, said:

"I phoned Miss Maffei. She says you're all right, anyway I don't believe it. If you get Anna into trouble my husband will kill you. Her father and mother are dead and she is a good girl, no matter if her head is full of flies."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Ricci." I grinned at Anna. "Don't you want to go for a ride?"

She nodded, and I led her out to the roadster.

If I ever kill anybody I'm pretty sure it will be a woman. I've seen a lot of stubborn men, a lot of men who knew something I wanted to know and didn't intend to tell me, and in quite a few cases I couldn't make him tell no matter what I

tried; but in spite of how stubborn they were they always stayed human. They always gave me a feeling that if only I hit on the right lever I could pry it out of them. But I've seen women that not only wouldn't turn loose; you knew damn well they wouldn't. They can get a look on their faces that would drive you crazy, and I think some of them do it on purpose. The look on a man's face says that he'll die before he'll tell you, and you think you may bust that up; a woman's look says that she would just about as soon tell you as not, only she isn't going to.

I sat and watched Anna Fiore for an hour that morning while Wolfe tried every trick he knew, and if she got away whole it was only because I remembered that you mustn't kill the goose that has the golden egg inside of her even if she won't lay it. Of course I didn't know whether she really had the golden egg and Wolfe didn't either, but there was no other goose we could think of that had any eggs at all.

Anna and I got to Thirty-fifth Street before eleven and were waiting for Wolfe when he came down. He started on her easy, as if all he wanted to do was tell her a story, not to get anything out of her, just to keep her informed. He told her that the man who had sent her the hundred dollars was the one who had killed Carlo Maffei; that he was wicked and dangerous; that the man knew that she knew something he

didn't want known and that he might therefore kill her; that Miss Maffei was a nice woman; that Carlo Maffei had been a nice man and should not have been killed and that the man who had killed him should be caught and punished.

Looking at Anna's face, I saw we were up against it.

Wolfe went into the subtleties of contract. He explained several times, using different kinds of words, that a contract between two parties was valid only when they both voluntarily agreed to it. She was under no contract of silence with the murderer because no contract had been made; he had merely sent her money and told her what to do. He had even given her an alternative; she could have burned the money if she had wanted to. She could burn it now. Wolfe opened the drawer of his desk and took out five new twenty-dollar bills and spread them out in front of her.

"You can burn them now, Miss Fiore. It would be sacrilege, and I would have to leave the room, but Mr. Archie will help you. Burn them, and you may have these to take their place. You understand, I will give you these — here, I lay them on the desk. You still have the money?"

She nodded.

"In your stocking?"

She pulled up her skirt and twisted her leg around and the bump was there.

Wolfe said, "Take it out." She

unfastened the top of her stocking and reached inside and pulled out the twenties and unfolded them. Then she looked at me and smiled.

"Here," Wolfe said, "here are matches. Here is a tray. I shall leave the room and Mr. Archie will help you and give you this new money. Mr. Archie would be very pleased."

Wolfe glanced at me, and I said, "Come on, Anna, I know you've got a good heart. You know Mr. Maffei was good to you, and you ought to be good to him. We'll burn it together, huh?"

I made the mistake of reaching out with my hand, just starting to reach out, and the twenties went back into her sock like a streak of lightning. I said, "Don't get scared, and don't be foolish. Nobody will touch your money as long as I'm around. You can burn it yourself; I won't even help you."

She said to me, "I never will."

I nodded. "You said that before, but you see it's different now. Now you have to burn it to get this other money."

She shook her head, and what a look she had on her face! She may not have had much of a mind, but what there was of it was all made up. She said, "I don't have to. I never will. I know, Mr. Archie, you think I'm not very bright. I think that too because everybody says I'm not. But I'm not dumb, not all dumb. This is my money and I never will burn it. I won't spend it until I can get married. That's not very dumb."

"You'll never get married if the man kills you the way he killed Mr. Maffei."

"He won't kill me."

I thought, by heaven, if he doesn't I will.

Wolfe took a new tack. He began trying to trick her. He asked her questions about her parents, her early life, her duties and habits at the Ricci's, her opinions of this and that. She seemed relieved and answered pretty well, but she took her time, especially when he got on to the rooming-house. And the first time he started to edge up on her, by asking something about cleaning Carlo Maffei's room, she closed up like a clam. He started somewhere else and came around by another way, but the same stone wall shut him off. It was really beautiful of her; I would have admired it if I had had time. Dumb or not, she had

it fixed up inside so that something went *click* when Carlo Maffei's name or anything associated with him was approached and it worked just as well as Wolfe's sagacity worked. He didn't give up. He had taken a quiet casual tone, and knowing his incredible patience and endurance I was thinking that after all there was a chance he might wear her down in a couple of weeks.

The door of the office opened. Fritz was there. He closed the door behind him, and when Wolfe nodded, came over and presented a card on a tray. Wolfe took it and looked at it and I saw his nostrils open a little.

He said, "A pleasant surprise, Archie," and handed the card across the desk and I reached across and took it.

The card said:

Manuel Kimball

(TO BE CONCLUDED)

what's in a NAME?

BY JOHN C. CRAIG

WRONGDOERS of Ballarat, near Melbourne, Australia, have reason to fear the name Duggan. Of the 40,000 persons in the city, it is coincidence that three of the top officials have this name. Criminals are tried before Stipendiary Magistrate D. J. Duggan, their convictions are recorded by Clerk of Court James Duggan, and their sentences are served at Ballarat Jail under Governor John Duggan. The three men are not related.

When two new detectives were hired to implement the staff at Long Beach, California, they were aptly named GOFORTH and KETCHUM, as is the sheriff in Fairplay, Colorado — John LAW.

The magistrate's court in a small town in southern England was handling the usual routine cases. Into the dock stepped a Mr. Hope who admitted having been drunk and was fined five shillings. Laughter broke out when he was followed by a second man, same offence, same fine — a Mr. Crosby.

The judge at Grand Island, Nebraska, finally found a man who lived up to his name. Pleading guilty to issuing a check without funds to cover it was Kenneth BOGUS.

In Sunderland, England, when a 25-year-old housewife was arrested for hitting her husband with an axe she gave her name as PATIENCE Brown, while in Des Moines, Iowa, an attorney filed divorce suits charging cruelty against two men, father and son, at the same time — Victor MEEK and Phillip MEEK.

For kissing his girl friend in a theater, Gianciero INNOCENTE was imprisoned for three months, and in Los Angeles, R. U. INNOCENTE was held for car theft.

Also in Los Angeles, when Selma Mary Fini sought a divorce, charging that her husband nagged her when she refused to drink with him, she asked permission to resume her maiden name: Selma Mary SOBER, a more fitting one.

A 43-year-old Los Angeles man became more than a little angry when his girl friend went out with another man. After blacking both her eyes, cutting her lip, breaking her right arm and one of her ribs, pulling her hair, burning her with a cigarette, jabbing her near the eye with a bobby pin, and finally locking her up, he gave his name to the police as Arden G. GOODNATURE. The records verified the name.

Encores

BY JOHN C. CRAIG

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Arley Lewis was being tried in juvenile court for stealing five cars. He figured the odds were against him, he'd probably get life at least, so he bolted from the courthouse in Roswell, New Mexico, ran ten blocks, and stole another car to get away.

In London, England, Jack Sorokin, 34, and Leon Komowski, 29, also had a liking for automobiles — other people's automobiles, that is. They were arrested for stealing an automobile, released on bail, and later when on their way to answer charges in court were arrested again in another stolen auto.

Justice of the Peace W. F. Keeton felt in a good mood when he allowed a defendant to get by with a light fine for a bad-check charge. His leniency was held in equally light regard and his mood changed when the check was returned marked "*Insufficient funds.*"

Charles McCullom, 20, was arrested for stealing an overcoat from the automobile of C. E. Spivey. Sentenced for three years, he was released with time off for good behavior. He's back in jail again, though, this time for a full three years. He stole another coat, from the same man from the same car.

Mrs. Horace Monday of Knoxville, Tennessee, thinks it a most bewildering world. She was knocked down by a reckless driver, got up, brushed herself off, was immediately knocked down again by the same driver.

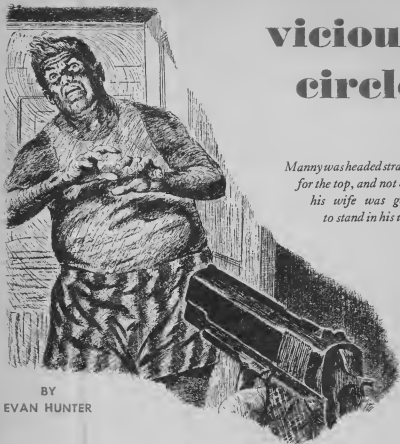
In Lima, Peru, Manuel Gallardo Orihuela, was knocked down by a hit-and-run driver. He shouted for help, was picked up by three men in another automobile who in turn robbed him of both his clothing and money.

Ettore Crescentini, of Milan, Italy, has found that society doesn't approve of his regard for women. In 1935 he was sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment for murdering his wife. Immediately upon release he married again. Now he has been sentenced to another 25-year stretch — for murdering his second wife.

Gwynneth Williams, of Cardiff, Wales, has appeared for the 226th time charged for being drunk. By comparison though, he's a mere novice. Edward Eugene Ebzery of Brisbane, Australia, finds three E's in his initials, but little ease in his encounters with the law. He marked up what is probably an all-time record. He was jailed for the 588th time for drunkenness.

vicious circle

*Manny was headed straight
for the top, and not even
his wife was going
to stand in his way.*



BY
EVAN HUNTER

THE WHOLE THING was almost too easy. I had the lock open in about ten seconds, and all I used was a nail file. I stepped inside out of the cold, closed the door gently behind me, stood quietly with my back to it. I didn't hurry. I eased the .45 out of my coat pocket and checked the clip. Then I shoved the clip home. It made a small click in the darkness of the foyer.

The house branched out from the foyer, one half leading to the kitchen area, the other to the living room and the bedrooms. I knew the house by heart because Mr. Williams had gone over the floor plan with me a hundred times.

"This is a big one, Manny," he'd said. "A real big one. You do this

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VERDICT

one right, and you're in. What I mean *in*."

I felt good about that. He'd picked me for the gig, and I knew it was an important one. He could have picked one of the punks, but he wanted it done right, and so he came to Manny Cole. And this would be the one. After this one, I'd be in the upper crust, one of the wheels. It had to be done right.

The living room was dark, just the way Mr. Williams had said it would be. I released the .45's safety with my thumb and stepped onto the thick pile rug that led off the foyer. From the back of the house, trickling under the narrow crack of a bedroom door, amber light spilled onto the rug in a thin, warm wash. I moved through the living room slowly, past the spinet against one wall, past the big picture window with the drawn drapes. I walked straight to the radio-phono combination, fumbled with its dials for a few seconds, and then turned it on full blast.

A jump tune blared into the room, shattering the silence of the house. I turned the station in more clearly, listening to the high screech of a trumpet beating out a bop chorus. The door to the bedroom popped open, and Gallagher came out.

He was in his undershirt and shorts, blue-striped shorts that hugged his fat middle. He waddled forward with a surprised look on his face, and his stubby fingers reached for a light switch. There

was a small click, and then the living room was filled with light. He looked worse with the light on him.

There was lipstick on his face, and I knew why, but that didn't concern me at the moment. Only Gallagher concerned me. His blue eyes were opened wide, embedded deep in the fleshy folds of his face. His mouth flapped open when he saw the .45 in my fist, and I thought he'd spit out his teeth. Then his face paled, and he began to shake, and the fat shivered all over him.

"Who . . . who are you?" he asked.

I chuckled a little. "Mr. Williams sent me," I said.

"Williams!" The word came like an explosion, and his face turned a shade paler. He knew what was coming.

"Mr. Williams doesn't like the way you've been doing things," I said.

Gallagher wet his lips. "What doesn't he like?"

"Lots of things," I told him. "The fur heist the other night, for example. He doesn't like people who do things like that."

"Those furs were mine," Gallagher shouted over the blast of the trumpet. "Bart knew that."

I shook my head. "Mr. Williams says they were his."

The music stopped and an announcer began talking. His voice sounded strange in the tense room.

"So . . . so . . . what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you, Gallagher."

"For God's sake, man, you can't . . ."

"As soon as the music starts again," I told him. "If you've got a religion, pray."

"Look, man, for the love of . . ."

"Gallagher, this is a job, like picking up garbage or shining shoes. Just like that. I'm deaf as far as you're concerned. Understand? I can't hear anything. I'm deaf."

The music started then, and panic whipped across Gallagher's face. He saw my eyes tighten, and he turned to run toward the bedroom, and that's when I cut loose. I fired low, with the barrel tilted so that the slug would rip upward.

The first one caught him just above the kidneys, spun him around, and slammed him into the wall. He didn't seem to know whether he should reach for the blood, or whether he should cover the rest of him. And while he was deciding, I pumped two more slugs into him. They tore into his face, nearly ripping his head off.

He fell to the floor, and the fat wiggled for a second before it was still.

I looked down at him just long enough to see the red puddle forming under his head. Then I turned away.

"Come on out," I said.

There was a soft whimper in the bedroom, but no movement.

"Come on, come on."

I heard bare feet padding on the rug, and then she was standing in the doorway. She'd thrown a robe around her, and she'd done it pretty quickly because she was still fastening the belt at the waist. The robe belonged to Gallagher, apparently, and it didn't help much to cover her. The initials RG were over the pocket, but the pocket was nowhere near where it should have been. It hung far to the right of her rounded shoulders, exposing the pale, pink-tipped globes of her breasts.

She had hair like a bed of charcoal, and it hung over one eye. Her lips had a fresh-kissed look, the way they can look only when the lipstick has been bruised into the flesh. Her eyes might have been smoldering a few minutes ago, but they were scared now. Her lips opened a little, and her eyes dropped quickly to the .45, and then over to Gallagher. She took a deep breath, and then stepped back a pace. When she moved, the robe opened at the waist, and I saw long, golden legs curving down to her bare feet.

She didn't say anything. She just looked at me with that frightened-animal look in her eyes, wide and brown and she kept backing away, moving toward the bed. She almost tripped on a pile of silk stockings and underwear on the floor. She looked down quickly, caught her balance, and then started to pull the robe closed over her breasts.

She hesitated for a moment, swal-

lowed hard, and then caught her hand in mid-motion. Slowly, she let it fall to her side, leaving the robe open, swallowing again. My eyes roamed over the lines of her body.

"A fat slob like Gallagher," I said. I shook my head. "I can't get over it."

"Look . . ." she started.

"Shut up!"

"Mister, I don't know Gallagher from a hole in the wall. I was just here, you understand? I got a call, that's all, and I came. It's a job, like you told Gallagher. A . . . a business."

"Sure," I said. I grinned and took a step closer to her. "You scared, baby?"

"N . . . n . . . no."

"You should be. You should be damned scared."

"Mister, please, I'll do whatever you say. Anything. Anything at all, mister. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Only . . . anything you say." Her fingers moved to the belt of the robe. I watched her hands fumbling with the bow, and then it slid apart, and the robe opened down the front, and she shook it off her shoulders, her breasts moving from side to side with the movement. The robe dropped over her waist, down the length of her thighs, tumbled around her feet. She sucked in a deep breath, her stomach flat, the curve of her upper body catching the soft, warm glow from the table

lamp. But fear, not yearning, was in her eyes.

"You want to get out of this alive?" I asked. "Is that it?"

"I . . ."

"Is that why you're doing all this?"

She smiled and took a step closer to me, confident of her body now, confident of what it would get her.

The smile was still on her face when I fired. I made it clean and quick. A fast one that caught her right over the bridge of her nose. She was dead before she hit the rug. Quickly, silently, I left the apartment.

Betty didn't understand. Nothing I said mattered. She sat with open paper in front of her and a coffee cup in her right hand. The steam from the coffee rose up and swirled around her nose. She didn't understand, and she didn't like it. Her mouth told me that.

"You look lousy when you've got a puss on," I told her.

"Then I'm going to look lousy for a long time," she said. She was blonde, with her hair cropped close around the oval of her face. She had green eyes that were blazing at me now, and tiny white teeth that were exposed when she pulled back her lips in a snarl. She was my wife, and a pretty piece, except when she was like this.

"Look, baby . . ." I said.

"Don't 'baby' me, Manny. Just don't."

"Well, what the hell *do* you

want?" I was beginning to get a little sore, too. I mean, what the hell! Enough is enough.

"You know what I want," she snapped.

"I don't know, and I'm not going to guess."

Her face got soft, the way I liked to see it, and her voice softened to match it.

"When's it going to end, Manny?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The anger flared in her again. "You know damn well what I'm talking about!"

"All right, I know, and it's never going to end. All right?"

"Who are you going to kill next?"

"Nobody," I said. "I'm not going to ever kill anybody. I ain't killed anybody so far. Just you remember that."

She slapped the newspaper with the back of her hand. "This Gallagher, and the girl . . ."

"I don't know anything about this Gallagher. And I don't know anything about his damned whore."

Betty looked at me across the table, and she shook her head slowly. "You're a fool, Manny. You really are a fool."

I got up, shoving my chair back so hard that it fell over. "I don't have to take this kind of crap in my own house. I'll be damned if I have to take it."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"None of your damn business!"

"To your friends? To your big Mr. Williams?"

"Oh, can it and sell it," I told her. I slammed the door behind me and walked down to the '48 Chevy parked at the curb. I yanked open the door, nearly ripping off the loose handle, and climbed in behind the wheel. What the hell could you do with a woman like Betty? She didn't understand that I'd be driving a Caddy in a few years, that we'd have the best, everything. She didn't understand that I was sick of brokesville, that I wanted to be up there where I could wallow in the stuff. Or maybe she thought it was an easy pull, like walking up to some guy and saying, "Man, I want the big time, you know? Lay it on me."

Sure, just like that.

Damn it, you had to fight for everything you got in this world. There was always another guy waiting to step on you if you let him. I wasn't going to let him. Mr. Williams liked me. He'd given me the Gallagher kill when there were a dozen punks slaving at the lips for it. You could bet on that, all right.

So she rode me for it. She didn't understand this was all for both of us — that Manny Cole would be a big man soon, almost like Mr. Williams.

I turned on the ignition, started the bus, and pulled away from the curb. She'd see. When the loot began pouring in, she'd change her tune pretty damn quick. As soon as the loot began pouring in.

Turk was riding high when I found him. He looked at me glassy-eyed for a few seconds, and then he said, "Hey, Cole. How's it, man?"

I remembered when Turk had been a top boy in the organization. I remembered how I'd gotten close to him first, just to get near Mr. Williams. He wasn't so top now.

"What's the word, Turk?" I asked.

"I hear you ventilated Gallagher nice," he said. "Real nice."

I looked around over my shoulder. "Hey, man," I said, "get off that. Cool it fast."

"Sure, Cole, sure." The dreamy look came back into his eyes again. He'd been main-lining it for a long time now. I felt sorry for the big slob. He'd been a good man long ago. Before he hit the skids and before he met heroin. Now he was getting slop details, rustling chicks for the big boys when they wanted them, stuff like that. He had a double-tread of puncture marks on his arms, and was starting the second tread on his legs. This was the guy I'd looked up to a few years back.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"Huh? What was that, Cole?" The glassy eyes opened, sunken deep in the once-full face.

"The boys. Where?"

"Oh, yeah. Down at Julie's, I think. Yeah, Julie's got a game going."

"Thanks, Turk."

"Not at all," he said politely. He coughed then, and added, "You got

a fin, Cole? I can get a couple caps for a fin, and I ain't been fixed since the Ice Age."

I dug into my wallet, opened it. I didn't let Turk see that all I had was a fin and a deuce. I pulled out the fin and laid it on him. "Here, man," I said. "Blow your skull."

"Well, thanks, Cole. Thanks a million. Hey, thanks."

I left him staring down at the fin, and hopped into the Chevy, heading for Julie's dump. Julie was close to the top, and he'd started out the way I had. Mr. Williams liked him, too, but since I'd come around, Julie wasn't getting many of the big jobs anymore. I figured Julie for maybe another year or two, and then goodbye. You had to stay on your toes all the time, and Julie had dropped his guard when he'd let me squeeze my way in. So, Julie was on the way out.

I parked the car between Second and Third and walked down to Julie's. He still wasn't living big, but he hadn't played it right. He was from nowhere, Julie, and I wondered how he'd ever got so close to the top in the first place. I rapped on the door, saw Cappy's eye appear in a crack the width of a dime.

"Oh, Cole," he said.

The door swung wide, and I stepped into the room. "Hello, Cappy. How's it going?"

"*Comme-ci, comme-ca,*" he said, pulling his face into a grimace. "Where's the game?"

"In the bedroom. You playing?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said casually. "Any action?"

Cappy shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I ain't playing," he said. He slumped down into a chair near the door, and I headed for the bedroom. When I walked in, the guys at the table, both sitting and standing, looked up.

"Hey, Cole! Look, guys! It's the big fellow himself."

"How goes it, man? Give us all the good talk, mister."

"Hear you punched some holes last night!"

"Nice work, Cole."

That's the way the talk was drifting until Julie cut in.

"We playing cards or greeting punks?" he asked.

The boys all shut up, as if Julie had clamped a big hand over all their mouths. I looked at him across the table. He was holding his cards out in a tight fan, and his black brows were pulled together over beady brown eyes. He had a thin, curving nose and a cigar pointed up from his lips, tilting so that it almost touched his nose. He didn't look at me. He kept staring at his hand while the boys waited for me to say something.

"What was that, Julie?" I asked.

"You heard me, Cole. You're disrupting the game."

"Seems you're the only one I'm disrupting, Julie."

He looked up then, his brows lifted. Slowly and carefully, he put his card fan down on the table.

"Yeah," he said, "maybe it is only me you're disrupting."

"Well, you know what you can do about it, Julie."

"And what's that, Cole?"

"You can shove it up your . . ."

He backed away from the table so fast that I didn't know he'd moved for a second. He walked around the players quickly and rammed a big hand at me, wrapping it in the lapels of my jacket.

He brought his other hand back across his chest and then sideways, catching me across the face with his knuckles. My head bounced back and then his forward slap caught me on the other cheek.

That was all I needed.

I brought my balled fist forward in a short, chopping jab to Julie's gut. He was surprised, all right. He was so surprised that he dropped my jacket and was reaching under his armpit when my other fist looped up and exploded on the point of his jaw. His lips flew open and the cigar flopped out of his mouth. He still had his hand on the bunny-in-the-hutch, so I picked up my knee fast and rammed it into his groin. He folded over like a jackknife, and I brought my fist down on the back of his neck hard, hard enough to crack a couple of vertebrae. He pitched forward like a drunken sailor, kissed the floor with his face, and then sprawled out without a care in the world. Julie was out.

I kicked him in the ribs to make sure, wanting to break a few, but

figuring maybe Mr. Williams wouldn't like the way I'd roughed him up.

"Get this crud out of here," I said. "How can you play with that stink in here?"

The boys laughed it up, and then one of them dragged him out of the bedroom. I sat down at the card table and played a few hands, just to let them know I could sit in Julie's chair any day. When I lost the deuce, I left.

The word came from Mr. Williams two days later. It came down through Turk, and for a minute I thought Turk was just hopped and talking through the top of his skull. I figured that Turk would never dream that up, though, no matter how wiggled he was, so I went up to see Mr. Williams fast.

He was sitting behind a big desk. He had blond hair and blond eyebrows, and pale blue eyes that pinned you to the wall.

"Hello, Manny," he said. "Pull up a chair."

I sat down, and my eyes ran over the hand-tailoreds he was wearing, and over the glistening pinky-ring, the manicured nails. He was the top. King of the hill. I watched him light a cigarette with a thin, rolled-gold lighter.

"A little trouble, Manny," he said.

"Anything I can do, Mr. Williams?"

"Well, it's a little trouble concerning you," he said. He blew out a

stream of smoke, pinned me with his eyes again.

"Oh," I said lamely. "You mean Julie. I . . ."

"To hell with Julie," Mr. Williams said. "He had it coming to him. I'm glad you worked him over."

"Well, thanks. I . . ."

"Your wife," Mr. Williams said.

"My . . . wife?"

"She was here, Manny. Just a little while ago."

"Betty? Here? My wife?"

"She made a lot of threats, Manny. Said she was going to the police. She said she was sick and tired of your taking orders from a big crook." He paused. "Do you think I'm a big crook, Manny?"

"No. No, Mr. Williams. You have to excuse my wife. Sometimes . . ."

"No, Manny," he said coldly. "She doesn't 'sometimes' any more. Things have gone much too far, I'm afraid."

"Wh . . . what do you mean by that, Mr. Williams?"

"I mean she talks too much. She said she'd give us a week, Manny. After that, she'd go to the police and tell them all about Gallagher and the girl. And a few others."

"She . . . she said that?"

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Not that she can touch us, Manny. She'd have a hard time proving anything. But I had big plans for you. You're one of the best boys I've got. I hadn't counted

on a hysterical woman, though."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Williams. I'll talk to her. I'll . . ."

"Talk!" he said. "Nonsense! Do you think you can talk her out of this?" He was mildly disturbed now. He got up and began pacing the room, back and forth in front of the desk. "Once a woman acquires a loose tongue, she never gets rid of it. She needs more than talk."

"But . . ."

"If you want to go places in this organization, you'll know what to do. I won't have to tell you. You'll know."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"You've got a week, Manny. After that, your wife begins screaming, and we'll be shaking the police out of our hair for a month after that. Disturbances like that annoy me."

"A week," I repeated dumbly.

"It's too bad you're married to her, Manny. It's really too bad. A woman like that can be a millstone around a man's neck. Unless something is done about it."

I nodded and got up. When I reached the door, Mr. Williams smiled and said, "You could be a big man in this organization, Manny. A really big man. Think it over."

And I thought it over. I thought it over for four days, then I tried talking to Betty. It didn't get me very far.

"I don't want to listen," she said. "You either quit your Mr. Williams,

or I go to the police. That's it, Manny. I've had enough."

"You ain't had nothing," I said. "Baby, we'll be in the chips. I'm moving up. Mr. Williams . . ."

"I'll scream!" she shouted. "If you mention his name once more, I'll scream."

"Baby . . ."

"Shut up! Shut up, Manny!" She started crying then, and I've never known what to do with a chick that bawls, so I left her alone and walked the streets for a while.

I found Turk, and I bought a few joints from him. Marijuana was candy to Turk. It never gave him a jolt, but he was willing to sell it so he could get his paws on the needle-stuff. I lit up one of the joints, sucking it in with loose lips, mixing it with air for a bigger charge. The street got longer and the buildings seemed to tilt a little, but outside of that, I didn't feel a thing.

I lit the other joint and smoked it down to a roach, and then I stuck a toothpick in that and got the last harsh, powerful drags out of it. I flew down the street, then, and I forgot all about Betty and her god-damn loose mouth. I was on a big cloud, and the city was just a toy city down below me, and I felt good. Hell, I felt terrific.

It didn't last. You pick up, and the charge is great, but it wears off and you got the same old problem again. Unless you're Turk, and then your big problem is getting the stuff that makes you forget.

On the sixth day, I knew what I had to do.

She went to a movie that night, and I walked the streets thinking it all over in my mind. Around eleven o'clock, I took a post in an alley near our house. I knew the way she came home. She always came home the same way. The Army .45 was in my pocket. It felt heavy, and my palm sweated against the walnut stock.

I heard her heels, and I knew it was she when she was still a block away. She crossed the street under the lamppost, and the light danced in her hair, threw little sparkles of sunlight across the street. She walked like a queen, Betty, with her shoulders back, and her fine, high breasts firm within her coat. Her heels tapped on the pavement and she came closer and I took the automatic out of my pocket.

When she reached the alley, I said, "Betty," soft, in a whisper.

She recognized my voice, and she turned, her eyebrows lifting, her mouth parted slightly. I fired twice, only twice.

The gun bucked in my hand and I saw the holes go right through her forehead, and she fell without screaming, without making a sound. I didn't look back. I cut down the alley and over toward Eighth Avenue. I dropped the gun down a sewer, then, and I walked around for the rest of the night. It was a long, long night.

The party was a big one. I stayed

close to Mr. Williams all night, and he called me his boy, and all the punks came around and looked up to me and I could see they were thinking, "That Cole is a tough cat, and a big man."

I was wearing a tailor-made suit. I'd laid down two hundred skins for it. My pinky-badge was white and clear even if I'd got it at a hock shop. It was a big party, all right, and all the big wheels were there, and Manny Cole was one of them. They were afraid of me, and they respected me. Even Julie. Julie maybe respected me more than all the rest.

The usual punks were there, too, eager, falling all over Mr. Williams, waiting for the big kill, the one that would put them up there on top of the heap. Mr. Williams introduced me to a young squirt named Davis, Georgie Davis or something. He said the kid was worth watching, that he'd done nicely on a few gigs so far. I watched the kid, and a few times I caught him watching me back, and there was a hungry, glittering look in his eyes.

I didn't get home until five in the morning. The dawn was creeping over the edge of the night in a grey, lazy way.

I stood in the kitchen in the quiet house. I had the money to move out of there now, but I hadn't made the break yet. I pulled back the curtain Betty had made, and I looked down over the roof tops, the way we used to long ago when we

were both a little younger — when Betty was alive.

It got chilly in the apartment. The chill reached through my skin and settled in my bones. I tossed the curtain aside and walked over to the phone, flipping open the pad Betty had bought in the five and dime. I'd written the number down when it was an important number to know, when I'd been a punk like Georgie Davis and when this number belonged to a guy on the top.

"Hello." The voice was tired, not a big shot's voice.

"Hello, Turk," I said tiredly. "This is Manny Cole."

"Oh, hello, Mr. Cole, how are you, what can I do for you?"

I smiled a little. "Turk, bring a girl over. I feel lonely, Turk."

"A girl?" Turk said. "Why, sure, Mr. Cole. Any particular kind?"

Mr. Cole. The smile got bigger on my face. "Use your own judgment, Turk. You know what I like."

"Sure, Mr. Cole. Right away."

"Incidentally, Turk . . ." I heard the click on the other end of the line, and I knew he'd hung up. I really didn't have anything more to tell him, but I had felt like talking a little more. Slowly, I put the

phone back into the waiting cradle.

The apartment was quiet, very quiet. I walked into the bedroom and stood before the dresser, looking down at Betty's comb and brush set.

I went to the phone, sat down near it, wondering whom I could call, wondering who I could talk to. I lit a cigarette, studied the burning end. I knew who I wanted to talk to.

I put her out of my mind. I thought of other things. I thought of Georgie Davis, the young punk who'd eyed me at the party. And I thought of all the other punks who'd stare at me with the bright gleam in their eyes and the hungry look on their faces. The young punks eager for a kill, eager for a lot of things.

I thought about them for a long time.

When the doorbell rang, I knew it was the girl.

I knew it couldn't be anyone else, but it took me a long time to open that door. And when I did open it, I had one hand on the slippery .45 in my pocket, and I was sweating. I wasn't scared, but I was sweating.

I was sweating because I knew I'd have to open a lot of doors in the days and nights to come —

And one of them would not open on a smiling girl.



WHAT'S YOUR VERDICT? NO. 3

BY LEONARD S. GRAY

They had him in a room with only three chairs in it. Roy sat in one chair, the police detective in another. The third one was empty.

The detective leaned closer. "You ready to answer some more questions?" he asked. His voice was flat, toneless, as though he was bored.

Roy shrugged. The questioning had taken four hours. He could take a lot more than that.

"Okay," the detective sighed. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and drew out a long manila envelope. "Maybe this will help you."

He pulled the empty chair over next to them, took some papers out of the envelope, and spread them out on the seat of the chair.

"Number one," the detective said. "A telegram from the chief of police in Hinsdale. Your partner, Jackson, was taken into custody there. He's confessed the robbery of the filling station, and he's implicated both you and the other man, Arnold."

Roy looked at the telegram and shrugged his shoulders again.

"Number two," the detective went on. "A handwritten confession from Arnold. We've got him in another room here, and he told us the whole story."

Roy stared at the handwriting on the sheet of paper, looked carefully at the signature at the bottom of the page. It was exactly like Arnold's.

"Number three—and this is the best." The detective showed two cards toward Roy. "These are your fingerprints, taken right here. And these are fingerprints taken at the filling station. They're the same, Roy."

Roy didn't shrug his shoulders this time. He looked down at the floor, then back at the detective, then at the papers on the chair. "All right," he said finally. "All right."

It didn't take long after that. The police stenographer came in. Roy dictated his confession, then signed it without a flicker of emotion.

The detective carefully blotted the signature, handed the confession to an assistant, and then grinned broadly at Roy. "Thanks," he said. "We've got what we want now." He began to chuckle. Roy looked puzzled.

"Everything was faked," the detective said, and the chuckle grew into a laugh. "The telegram, Arnold's confession, the fingerprints—all fakes."

Roy jumped up from his chair. "You won't get away with it!" he shouted. "My lawyer will have the confession thrown out of court. It isn't legal. You committed forgery to get me to confess. It isn't legal."

Was Roy right? Could his confession be invalidated because of the deception used by the police?

What's your verdict?

ANSWER

Probably not. The courts have held that a confession obtained through such means as were used on Roy is a perfectly valid confession. Chief of the police said nothing to get an untrue confession, could the confession be declared invalid.

The minutes ticked by

Stapp thought of the bomb he had set there in the cellar, and a peculiar sound like the low simmering of a tea-kettle or the mewling of a newborn kitten came percolating thinly through the gag in his mouth. His vocal cords were strained to bursting with the effort. His eyes were fastened on the two thieves in horror and imploring.

The thieves saw the look as they went on up, but couldn't read it. It might have been just the physical effort of trying to burst his bonds, it might have been rage and threatened retribution, for all they knew.

The first paused obliviously through the basement doorway and passed from sight. The second stopped halfway to the top of the stairs . . .

Stapp's eyes almost started out of their sockets . . .

And then with the horrible slowness of a nightmare the second thief's head went out through the doorway, his shoulders following, his waist next . . .

In the silence now, above the surge of Stapp's own tidal breathing that came and went like surf upon a shoreline, was the counterpoint of the clock. Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick, the sound of the bomb that he had set . . .

READ: THREE O'CLOCK, by William Irish, the terrifying story of a man trapped in a cellar, staring helplessly at the bomb he himself has set to explode.

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